



CREST ¹ OF THE STARS

PRINCESS OF THE EMPIRE

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Foreword

The figure that is depicted in this crest is called a “Gaftnochech,” or, when written phonetically, a “Gaftnosh.” It is a dragon of aberrant form, as it sports eight heads. This mythical beast had long been forgotten. However, a certain empire chose it to adorn the design of its crest, and so the “Gaftnosh” became the most prominent of all the imaginary creatures humanity has conceived.

That was by simple dint of the fact that the empire comprised a nation of enormity unparalleled in human history. The race that built the empire is named the Abh (pronounced “AHV”). Perhaps they ought to be called what they, in their pride, call themselves — the Kin of the Stars.

In any case, let us return our attention to the Gaftnosh. After all, there are countless texts on the subject of that race.

Roberto Lopez, *The Cryptids that Inhabited Earth*

CREST OF THE STARS 1 — The Imperial Princess

Characters

Jinto (or “Ghintec” in Abh writing)

..... Son of the President of the Planetary Government of Martin

Lafier (LAFEER, or “Lamhirh” in Abh writing)

..... Apprentice starpilot aboard the patrol ship Goslauth

Hecto-Commander Lexshue (LEKSHOO, or “Laicch”)

..... Captain of the Goslauth

Deca-Commander Rairia (RAY'REEA, or “Rairiäc”)

..... Vice-captain of the Goslauth

Klowar (KLWARR, or “Clüarh”)

..... Ruler of the Febdash Barony

Sruf (SROOF, or “Srumh”)

..... Klowal's father and former Baron of Febdash.

Seelnay (SELL'NYE, or “Sélinaïc”)

..... Servant vassal of the Febdash Barony

Durin (DOORIN)

..... Jinto's friend from his time on the planet Delktu

Prologue

The night sky was nigh cloudless. Staring up at the heavens on a night like this evoked the sensation they might just suck up its hapless spectators.

Between the stars, satellites glided slowly — satellites that weren't present near the planet Martin 30 days prior. They gazed down menacingly, as though upon a planet of prisoners, illuminating with their phosphorescent glow. One might have wondered whether the moon they said orbited Earth shone like that, too.

The pinprick of light that passed beneath them must have been an Abh spaceship: the real, true oppressors of the 10 million citizens of Martin.

Actually, there wasn't merely a single point of light. There were, in fact, dozens. No matter where in the night sky one planted their eyes, at least one of them came into view.

Even now, another flock emerged from beyond the Exotic Jungle that plunged ever deeper into the pitch dark, not unlike the bugs of Martin that gathered, teeming to frolic. The points of light were especially numerous near that giant sphere wrapped in a faint light. Careful observation revealed that the lights were moving in and out of the sphere.

The flocks of lights painted long luminescent streaks behind them, sliding across the celestial expanse with a speed that proved they couldn't be stars. There were even those that dipped close enough to the surface that one could ascertain their shape, if only dimly. It was like something out of a dream. Jinto ought to have resented them, but he could only stare, transfixed.

Jinto Lin was eight years of age then. According to the standard calendar insisted upon by a subset of adherents of the old nostalgic Earth ways, he was 10. By either reckoning, he was a child. Though it was well past a child's bedtime, Jinto stared up at this unfamiliar night sky from the hybrid-functionality structure's rooftop park.

In the distant past, before Jinto was born, the only star system humanity inhabited was what was called the "Solar System."

An Oort Cloud research vessel that was deployed by a certain nation discovered a wondrous elementary particle in a sector 0.3 light-years away from the sun. Its mass was 1,000 times greater than a proton's. It would have been a huge anomaly had that been all, yet its baffling characteristics proved numerous.

For one, it released around 500 megawatts of energy. No one could point to where that energy came from. Some put forward the so-called "White Hole Theory" to explain it; others theorized it was due to parallel dimensions, hyperspace, or subspace — whatever the term for it, they claimed one or more holes must have opened up in the barrier that divides this universe from alternate ones. All of those ideas were nothing more than speculation: hypotheses at best.

In any event, the particle was given the name "yuanon," and research commenced. That research did not aim to determine its true nature; rather, it sought to secure methods of *utilizing* it.

Humanity had, at that juncture, already obtained nuclear fusion, so they did not usually worry about their source of power on land, but the depths of space were another matter entirely. Before any prospect of efficient interstellar travel could be entertained, the issue of mass differentials lay before them. If someone attempted to travel to the next star over within their lifetime, it would require an amount of fuel many hundreds of times heavier than the combined weight of the ship and its load.

That was the principle set in stone by physics. A fuel-on-board nuclear fusion propulsion model would never be suitable for practical use. Even the Bussard Ramscoop Propulsion Method, which had a fair amount of hope placed in it, was ultimately considered impossible due to the density of interstellar matter. Nor, indeed, was matter-antimatter annihilation-propulsion within reach, and even if it had been, it wouldn't solve the mass problem.

On the other hand, if yuanons could be made the spaceship's energy source, then differentials of mass could be disregarded without concern. After all, fuel would no longer be necessary. For that reason, the yuanon-propulsion spaceship was engineered.

Its basic structure was cylindrical; at the core of the cylinder lay a magnetic trap that held in yuanons. The cylinder's interior was lined with a high-temperature superconducting substance which reflected the charged particles emitted by yuanons. A portion of the electromagnetic waves were then absorbed, with the surplus energy radiating into the vacuum through a heat sink. Meanwhile, electrically neutral particles could be absorbed by the material inserted between the inner tubes and the overall structure.

When a pilot wished to accelerate with full power, they could close one of the tubes and funnel the rushing torrent of energy in a single direction. If they didn't want to accelerate, they could open both tubes to emit equal amounts of energy in both directions. Adjusting the rate of acceleration was as simple as opening and closing the tubes' apertures.

Despite the multitude of technical and economic barriers, rampant overpopulation and the strife it caused would mark the final stages of the era and lend strongly to the realization of yuanon propulsion.

A survey into nearby star systems had already been completed by unmanned nuclear fusion-propelled ships. As a result, atmospheres containing free oxygen were found to be rare in this galaxy. It was not enough for the planet to have the right level of gravity and distance from its sun; other factors such as the initial conditions of the star system's formation and its rock composition ratios also came into play. Earthlike planets were the exception among exceptions. That meant that the number of planets on which carbon-based lifeforms could live was low.

Regardless, that was not an insurmountable problem for the Star System Emigration Plan, since the pressure caused by the ever-burgeoning population spurred humanity to outfit themselves with terraforming technology, implementing trial runs on bodies such as Mars and Venus. After that, it became apparent that all they had to do was apply the technology to which they'd already grown accustomed to other star systems. Nor was there any need to worry their heads over ethical issues regarding extraterrestrial lifeforms.

Thus, the first yuanon-propelled spaceship, dubbed "Pioneer," was constructed. Pioneer's mission was to carry the personnel and materials

necessary to open a colonial hub-point. Once laser-propeller bases were set up, people and objects could then be ferried through light-sail-propelled spaceships, mitigating overreliance on precious yuanon-propelled ships.

Whenever humanity would find a planet that even remotely resembled their old home, they would move in on it. They expanded their domain by terraforming planets that resembled Venus or Mars as well. This was achieved by increasing the density of otherwise overly thin atmospheres to breathable concentrations, or else by trapping and thinning excess parts of high-pressure atmospheres. Atmospheric remodeling, soil production, ecosystem construction...

As they expanded their domain, a new type of yuanon was discovered, unlocking the potential for a new interstellar emigration ship. Its construction was undertaken not only within the Solar System, but also in other settled star systems.

The ancestors of the inhabitants of the planet Martin came on an interstellar immigration vessel built in the Solar System named the “Leif Erikson.” During this era, the scarcity of yuanons slightly dropped, such that instead of opening a colonial hub, it became possible to introduce yuanon-propelled starships throughout all corners of the emigration program. In the case of the Leif Erikson, it was subsumed into the mission of surveying and selecting places to reside during its preliminary stage. In other words, to board the Leif Erikson was to be sent away, the call to “go live somewhere, anywhere else” ringing in its wake.

There were cases where people were merely sent on ships as nuisances to get rid of. But the passengers and crew of the Leif Erikson harbored a peculiar desire. They were thoroughly fixated on a planet wrapped in an atmosphere containing large amounts of oxygen. They thought that there must be an exotic ecosystem out there somewhere, and for countless generations they searched far and wide, until, finally, they found a blue planet orbiting a G-type star.

The star was named after their first captain, Hyde, while the planet with the oxygenic atmosphere was named after their captain at the time of discovery. Although there was no intelligent life on the planet Martin, a plethora of bizarre flora and fauna did thrive there. The population of the settlers that came

aboard the Leif Erikson, who were careful not to disrupt the alien ecosystem there, slowly increased over time.

Following the completion of the settlement process, the Leif Erikson, the interstellar immigration vessel whose duty was now over, was moored in continuous orbit around Martin in commemoration.

On Day 57 of the first season of the 172nd year of their Post-Landing Calendar, the Leif Erikson exploded without warning. In its aftermath lingered the phosphorescent satellite. Although a “satellite” by name, it did not constitute any solid matter, as it was a mere clump of gas. It was a unique, formless, spherical pocket of space — in truth, a completely transformed mass of yuanons that were once captive within the Leif Erikson. Such was the true nature of Martin’s portentous new “moon,” which had not yet been given a name.

A single spaceship appeared from out of the explosion. That ship refused all communication, but, interestingly, it circled Martin three times before turning its back on the planet’s uneasy populace and quickly returning through the dimly glowing spherical pocket of space.

People made moves to look into the space-sphere, the parting gift left by the mysterious spaceship. However, before the government could appropriate the necessary funding, any opportunity to investigate was dashed, alongside any point of conducting one.

On Day 81 of that very same season and year, a large fleet suddenly made its appearance from within the space-sphere. This time, it was they who wished to communicate. They’d most likely analyzed the radio waves from 24 days prior, determined that Martinese had its roots in the tongue of “English,” and set their translation device accordingly. It was not so difficult to understand the ancient words in the case of Martin, and so there was no language barrier for their first contact.

They called themselves “Abh” (pronounced “AHV”): that was the name of their race. They had blue hair, but their faces and figures were decidedly human, and they were all outwardly youthful and beautiful. They attested thus: “We may look a little different, but we too are children of Earth.” It was just

that their genes had been slightly modified.

The Abh were said to rule 1,500 human-populated star systems and over 20,000 half-human-populated star systems. The official title of their system of government (that is to say, their nation) was the *Frybaréc Glær Gor Bari* (FRYIBAR GLEHR GOR BAREE, Humankind Empire of Abh), though it was often called the *Bar Frybaréc* (Abh Empire) for short.

The star system's administration promptly called for talks to enter into a friendly accord. Yet Commander-in-Chief Abliar, leader of the invasion armada, rejected the offer.

"Sadly," said Commander Abliar, "I cannot do that. My duty is not to forge an alliance for the sake of the Empire; it is to add another world to the Empire's dominion."

Given that these were not unarmed ships, but a deployed armada, there were people who suspected they intended to invade, but even they were not immune from the shock. No one could have imagined they'd be hit with such a direct, unabashed declaration. Was it not a matter of reason to start things off with peaceful negotiation? Even if it would turn into intimidation and browbeating more or less immediately.

It was useless to insist on talking to a diplomat as opposed to a soldier: "I am not just a soldier," the Commander replied. "I am also a diplomat. In fact, to tell you the truth, I am also Crown Prince. My will is the Empire's will, at least with regards to how you shall be dealt with. I understand your concerns, so I shall deign to explain what it will be like to be a subject of the Empire. I cannot, however, agree to hold negotiations. We have already recognized this planet as belonging to the Empire."

Naturally, an explanation was in order. It was not only government officials, but also the common citizenry who keenly needed one. As such, the video image of the Fleet Commander speaking from the flagship was relayed in real time. It was only then that the people saw what their assailants looked like for the first time.

Pointed ears poked through dark, navy blue locks that draped down to his waist area. That, combined with the crown of delicate make upon his head,

conjured up the image of a fairy out of a children's fable more than a stereotypical *invader*. His face white as fresh snow, he seemed a youth of around 25, and a handsome one. The expression on his countenance, which could be mistaken for a comely lady's, was listless, languid. It spoke volumes of how tedious he found the task of conquering the Hyde Star System.

"Now then, I shall outline the terms between the Empire and your surface world," said the Crown Prince of Abh, his voice loud and clear. The words, spoken in *Baronh* (BAHROHNYUH, the language of the Abh), continued to be translated into Ancient English, which was in turn translated into Modern Martinese by their own automatic translator.

"First of all, there will be no possibility of maintaining a noble rank in your star system. In light of this star system's special nature, Her Majesty the Empress will be your lord, at least for the time being. Naturally, Her Majesty has other duties to which she must attend, and as such, a local governor will be dispatched. We believe overworld governance to be a labor far removed from the realm of the elegant, and so long as the ground-dwelling populace can look after themselves, the lords and magistrates will seldom interfere in any of your more trifling matters. Needless to say, those principles apply to all of you as well."

"Now, kindly put forward your representative. That individual will become your lord or magistrate, as well as your negotiator with the Empire. It matters not to us what title you bestow upon the office. You may call them 'President,' or 'Chief,' or 'Presiding Chair,' or even 'Emperor.' If you would like to hold onto the illusion that you are a sovereign nation, you may call them 'Foreign Minister.' All the same, the title will appear in imperial documents as 'Territorial Representative.'"

"It goes without saying, but you are free to choose how you select them. Please use any method you like — elections, hereditary succession, nominations, drawing lots. However, in order to be a Territorial Representative, do be aware that it is necessary to receive the approval of your lord. This will essentially amount to a formality, but veto rights will be exercised against those who would flagrantly advocate secession from the Empire. "

"Your lord will not claim any right to levy taxes. Instead, the Empire

recognizes the exclusive right to trade with other star systems. The profits so acquired will sustain your lord's livelihood. In some cases, you may invest in your planet, or other planets in your system. In addition, in order to safeguard your assets, it may prove necessary to post an independent garrison, separate and distinct from your autonomous governing body. That being said, it would be in accordance with a pact reached with your lord, and you will retain plenty of room for negotiation."

"Roughly speaking, the Empire will only compel you to obey two dictates."

"Firstly, construction of spaceships capable of interstellar navigation shall be forbidden. This is because once you are under imperial control, you, too, will quickly learn how to overcome the light-speed barrier. Such a development is inevitable, but see to it that you do not entertain the notion of actually applying that knowledge. We do not generally permit vessels that navigate to other systems across space. At the risk of repeating myself: Inter-system trade is a privilege enjoyed by your lord, and one protected by imperial patronage. Depending on whether your lord gives the nod, you may be allowed to possess spaceships should they keep their travels within your star system. However, we will not recognize any right to arm those ships."

"Secondly, we shall be putting into place a recruitment office for the Imperial Star Forces. We dispatch soldiers to carry out official duties and maintain security, and the soldiers stationed on your planet's surface will be there for those purposes only. Inferring from your population, these will not exceed 10,000 in number. As long as your autonomous government is alive and well, I promise that we will not press upon you any additional troops without your consent. Furthermore, there will be no draft, nor any conscription. Surface people are free to choose to join the Star Forces if they so desire. However, we must add that any attempt to interfere with an individual's free will to volunteer for military service is forbidden."

"Now, as for your social status, you are all considered 'territorial citizens.' If, however, you enlist in the Stellar Army and become a vassal of your lord, and decide of your volition to work for the Empire, you will then become a citizen not of your territory but of the Empire and its nation, thereby relinquishing any ties with your territory's local government in favor of obtaining the Empire's

patronage. That is what it means to be a subject of the Empire.”

“In any case, dramatic change will be coming to your daily lives. That change will not be affected by any tyranny on the part of your lord, but rather by the goods that will become available from other systems. We do not expect any loyalty to the Empire or His Majesty, so once you become accustomed to these unfamiliar novelty goods, your conscious awareness of your subjection to the Empire as ‘territorial citizens’ will largely fade.”

“Now, I have reached the end of my speech.”

“From now on, a subordinate will answer any questions you may have in my stead. Please choose how you will come under the Empire’s rule: peacefully, or forcefully, by outcome of war. Personally, I have deemed the bio-resources of this planet a valuable commodity, but I caution you not to make any unfounded assumptions that we will therefore hesitate to burn you off the surface of your planet. Happily for us, your metropolis is quite conspicuous. It would be more than feasible for us to destroy it without causing much harm to the surrounding nature.”

“Now then, you are free to vex my subordinates with an endless *font* of questions, but their patience is limited, so we cannot humor your questions indefinitely. Your deadline to reply is precisely three rotations from now.”

Among other imperial subjects, the address was more respectful than most anticipated, but the people of the city who watched the broadcast were incensed. Though polite on a surface level, no care had been taken to word things so as to gain their good will. After all, the rank arrogance was there for all to hear. There was no sign of any consideration that there was even a possibility they could be rebuffed.

The ire of the politicians and the senior bureaucrats was especially intense. The positions that they’d jostled so hard to seize had been described by that young Abh noble as “a labor far removed from the realm of the elegant”! Besides, what proof did they have that he was telling the truth? For all they knew, the Abh Commander could be lying, and subjects of the Empire were victims of repression. In fact, it would be crazy to honestly believe that a bunch of people who had come out of nowhere to all but attack them were actually

sincere.

Naturally, bureaucrats and representatives of the city's inhabitants did go on to pepper the officers with endless questions through the communication circuits, gaining a lot of information in the process. However, the time they were given to analyze that information was far too short. Attempting to determine the authenticity of their answers was an exercise in despair. A group of experienced court attorneys joined the lawmakers in questioning the Abh officers, but they failed to find any points of contradiction. Though, even if the information they were given had been full of lies, the administration of the Hyde Star System had little choice regardless.

The planet Martin housed an anti-space defense system. Since they had also come here from the reaches of space, it was rather easy to predict there would one day be an incursion from that very same space. There was no need to envisage an extrastellar intelligence. The possibility their very own cousins, violent and ill-mannered, would come for them was already there. Yet allocating the necessary defense funding was easier said than done.

The heads of several different administrations zealously tackled this issue, but all they had were 10 grounded anti-space lasers and 20 anti-space missiles. They boasted no spacefaring army, and it fell on a department within the Ministry of Facilities to maintain and inspect those anti-space weapons. In times of emergency, the weapons' launch controls were supposed to be overseen by a part-time general in an underground control room.

The only other arm of military power the star system's government had access to was the police force that was equipped to, at best, tamp down on a large-scale riot. To say facing off against the firepower of a space armada would place too heavy a burden on them would be an understatement.

Despite that, there was a faction in Parliament that wanted war. They reasoned that the giant fleet could be a bluff, and that, even if they were no match for them in the theater of space, there was hope for victory on the surface. They also reasoned that all other considerations aside, this was a matter of honor. Would it really be fine with the people to simply submit without even attempting to fight?

Of course, there were equally staunch people who thought those arguments were shallow-minded, and as such they dug themselves deeper and deeper in the debates. Discussion went from the clash of lofty concepts and philosophies, to the flinging of personal invective.

However, their session could hardly go on forever. After all was said and done, their deadline loomed in three short days. A day on Martin lasted two hours longer than a day on their ancestral homeworld, but they had to reach a consensus of opinions, and urgently. Unfortunately, Parliament wasn't accustomed to issuing a decision with any swiftness. Reluctantly, they entrusted the decision to the head of government.

The head of government at that time was Rock Lin — Jinto Lin's father.

President Lin shared his thoughts with only a handful of others, and whipped up support. Some vigorously opposed him, but he succeeded in laying a gag order on them. With the deadline approaching, President Lin stood before the transmission equipment of his presidential residence with his reply prepared...

"So that's where you were," said a familiar voice from behind him. "I was looking for you."

"Ah, right," replied Jinto.

There stood a tall, slim, middle-aged man. It was Teal Clint, President Lin's private secretary. He had served in that role since Lin was a member of Parliament, and had known him since before Jinto was born.

Jinto, for his part, had known about him since he was a child. He more than merely *knew* him, though. He had practically been raised as his own flesh and blood.

Jinto never knew his mother. She had been a mine supervisor, dying in an accident before her only son had even learned to crawl. Rock Lin had felt uneasy about the prospect of raising his son as a single father, and he had his hands full with his political responsibilities, so he asked Teal, whom he found so dependable, as well as his wife Lina, to bring up Jinto. The Clints were fond of one another, but by happenstance were without child, so they were actually grateful when they took up Rock's request. Jinto believed himself to be Teal's son until primary school, and the affection he felt for that secretary was deeper

than what he felt for his real father. The person he loved the most in the world, however, was Lina Clint.

The sharp features of Teal's dark-skinned face were overcast by a sullen shadow.

"I'm sorry," Jinto apologized. He thought he'd be scolded for being outside in the dead of night — and a particularly *dangerous* night at that, given the situation. "I'll go back to my room right now!"

"That's all right. Just come with me." Teal grasped his hand with enough force to nearly tear it off and stomped off.

Fear dawned on Jinto at the sight of Teal's unusual, alarming behavior. "Where're we going?"

"The Presidential Residence."

"The Presidential Residence?"

The City of Crandon, the sole city on all of Martin and home to its humans, was composed of three hybrid-functionality structures. They had been given exceedingly practical names, devoid of sentiment: "Omni I," "Omni II," and "Omni III." Jinto lived in Omni III with the Clints, while the Presidential Residence was in Omni I.

"What're we going there for?" Going to the Presidential Residence meant seeing his father. What business did his father have with him during such a pivotal time? To say nothing of Teal Clint, who, as the secretary of the head of government, should have had more vital work than picking up an eight-year-old boy.

"Just come!" Teal turned his back and strode on.

"Wait! Hold on!" Teal's strides, which were long even for an adult, forced the adolescent boy to trot to keep up with him. Normally, he'd slow his pace for Jinto; what on earth had happened?

Teal didn't so much as turn his head. "We have no time, hurry up."

Finally, they had arrived at the elevator-box.

"Hey, are you mad at me about something? I'll say I'm sorry, so please..."

Teal didn't answer back. His frustration evident, he just poked at the elevator-box's wall with his index and middle fingers, waiting for it to open up.

Finally, the elevator-box doors opened. No one was in it. Jinto had never been so frightened by the idea of being alone with Teal.

"Take us to the Nexus Floor," Teal told the computer that directed the elevator.

The doors closed and, when the elevator began to lower, Jinto felt he couldn't keep quiet for even a second longer. "Hey, do you think we can win?"

"We'll neither win nor lose. There won't be a war to win," he grumbled in reply.

"So we gave up?"

Teal glared at the boy. "That's right. Your father chose to surrender. He didn't just 'surrender,' though – he sold us out."

"He sold us out? What do you mean?"

"The bastard made a deal. A dirty, rotten deal," spat Teal bluntly.

"A deal?"

"Stop repeating me like a damn parrot!"

"I... I'm sorry." The boy ducked his head.

"Don't get me wrong; I was against war, too. It really doesn't look like we could win. But to make a deal like that!? Dammit, I've lost all respect for Rock!"

Jinto grew sad. He'd been secretly proud that he had two fathers. And yet, here was the father who raised him cursing out the father who sired him. His eyes filled with tears.

The father that raised him flashed a guilty expression upon seeing the boy start sobbing convulsively. "I'm sorry. It's not remotely your fault, but I..."

"Tell me what's going on! I've got no idea..."

"Nor would you." Teal ruffled his short black hair. "Like I said before, Rock struck a deal. What he did will be announced all too soon. There's no doubt he'll be the object of the scorn of all who live on Martin. There will even be

quite a few who will think that if they can't lay their hands on him, they can at least pummel his family members. That's the reason I'm taking you to the Presidential Residence, where there's strict security."

"You mean I'll get beaten up by a mob?" Jinto quivered.

"It's not out of the question." Teal nodded in cruel confirmation. "Even if it doesn't come to that, they'll heap harassment on you. Verbal abuse. Throwing things. Maybe you'll get a smoke candle tossed into your room."

When Teal referred to Jinto's room, the first thing that popped in his mind was Lina Clint. "Then what's Lina gonna do? Tons of people know I live in your house!"

"I've already contacted her. She's a grown-up; she can take care of herself."

"You mean she's gone to a safe place before us?" He couldn't believe Lina would run away without him.

"Yep." Teal read Jinto's expression. "She was worried about you, you know. I calmed her down by telling her I'd go look for you."

"Okay." But something wasn't sitting right with him. After all, there would have been no guarantee Teal would actually find him. Lina would have wanted to search for Jinto, too. That's what the Lina that Jinto knew would have done.

The elevator reached the Nexus Floor on Tier 3, and its doors opened. Each morose for different reasons, the two stepped out onto the Nexus Floor. Countless elevator-tubes were lined up on this floor, running from the top to the bottom of the hybrid-functionality building. They were reminiscent of the pillars holding up the heavy roof of an ancient temple. Unmanned taxi-boxes rushed around between the tubes.

A taxi-box detected the elevator-doors opening and stopped in front of them. With just his right arm, Teal prompted Jinto to get on. Jinto tried to settle his nerves, but he couldn't regain his composure.

"The Presidential Residence. Hurry," Teal murmured tersely to the taxi-box. Afterwards, he crossed his arms, and remained silent.

Jinto wondered what exactly the "deal" entailed. The mood that hung in the

air made it exceedingly difficult to probe Teal, but he gathered up all the courage in his small frame and asked: “C’mon, tell me about the deal.”

“It’s confidential. It’s being kept under wraps from the general public until the official announcement.”

“From me, too?” he hazarded to ask, timidly.

The secretary snorted in response. “Capitalizing on your *new privileges* already, I see!”

“What do you mean...?”

“Switch on the holo. The announcement will be on in no time.” Jinto did as he was told and switched on the taxi-box’s attached holovision. The stereoscopic video played above the manual driving apparatus.

“For now, the Abh fleet hasn’t made any moves,” said the tiny, translucent figure. “Reports have come in that there has been some kind of back-and-forth between President Lin and the invaders. According to information obtained from a certain source, it is said that our surrender to the Empire has been confirmed. Even so, we cannot but continue to hope that those reports are mistaken, and that our leaders will make decisions with honor. In addition, we received notice that there will be a, quote, ‘statement of grave significance’ delivered at the Presidential Residence at precisely 25 o’clock. 90 seconds remain.”

They were a long 90 seconds – a minute and a half he wanted to elapse quickly, but that he also wanted to stretch on forever. Jinto was running out of patience as he anxiously stared at the 3-dimensional video, glancing occasionally at the man beside him.

Teal was as still as a statue. He didn’t give the hologram so much as a peek, instead fixing his line of sight straight ahead.

The taxi-box exited the hybrid-functionality structure and ran through the Liaison Tube suspended in the Exotic Jungle.

Finally, the time came.

The video had already shifted to displaying an empty podium. Then, a

handsome-looking spokesman appeared to take the podium. “I will deliver the statement.”

Jinto gulped from the tension, and gazed at the spokesman’s mouth.

“Today, at 23:52, Rock Lin, President of the Government of the Hyde Star System, expressed to Crown Prince and Imperial Fleet Commander Abliarsec néïc-Lamsar Dusanh, His Highness King of Barce, his intention to cede the Hyde Star System’s autonomy. Starting today, we are a part of the Humankind Empire of Abh.”

Though the holographic projection didn’t display them, Jinto could hear the clamor of the press corps that had been intently watching the spokesman. There was no shock, no anger in that tumult of voices. There was only resignation. He even heard someone mutter an “I knew it.”

Jinto glanced at Teal, thinking: *See, it couldn’t be that bad, right?*

“There’s more,” said Teal.

“However, the President felt that he’d like for the citizens of the Hyde Star System to be the ones to operate the paths to other systems, and as such suggested a compromise. That is to say, a proposal to install a citizen of this system as our ‘lord.’”

“You mean that’s possible!?” someone gasped.

“There will be time for questions later. Please maintain order,” the spokesman said, parrying with ease. “However, I will make an exception in this case and answer. Given the terms they reached, it was indeed possible. In exchange for the codes necessary to disable our anti-space defense system, our new ruler acceded to conditions more favorable for us.”

“Then who’s this new ‘lord’?”

“I told you, you may ask questions later. The initial idea was to select our lord by means of an election. Unfortunately, however, the positions of imperial nobility aren’t swayed by electoral results. Nobles aren’t generally familiar with the electoral system to begin with!” the spokesman said, attempting a chuckle and botching it.

Even through the airwaves, viewers picked up on the increasingly murderous current in that room.

“Who’s our lord!?” Same question, different voice.

“You did watch Commander Abliar’s explanation regarding the Empire and Star System, did you not? He may be our ‘lord’ in a technical sense, but he’ll be more akin to the owner of a space trade company. Owners of corporations aren’t chosen through elections; it’s mostly hereditary in practice, so...”

“Who’s our lord!? Dammit, I know, everyone here knows, and you better believe everyone watching knows! We just want to hear you say it, loud and clear! Tell us, what’s the name of our new *lord and master*?”

Even Jinto had caught on, however much he didn’t want to believe it. “It can’t be... he’s lying...” He looked to Teal’s eyes for salvation. And yet, he sat there expressionless, his lips shut. Jinto turned back to the broadcast, to find the spokesman staring up. He’d been driven into a corner.

“Very well. It’s as you’ve all probably surmised. Rock Lin will be making our star system his territory.” The outcry that ensued could only be described as unmitigated rage.

“That was it. That was the deal,” said Teal. “Just so he could rise in status to a noble, he handed our only weapon over to our invaders. I had no idea those Abhs had feared our anti-space defense system so much. Maybe we could have put up a real fight after all.”

“B-But...” Jinto tried his level best to defend his father’s honor. “He tried to get them to let us vote for who’d be lord at first! Which means—”

“I wouldn’t know!” Teal ground his back teeth. “I only caught wind of his ‘idea’ after it was all over. After the defense systems had been disabled, after the Lin family would join the ranks of imperial nobility. I don’t care what terms he initially proposed. That weasel didn’t bother consulting me, his own secretary, beforehand, and he apparently didn’t think he had much use for me, either. He must have thought all I could do was bring his kid someplace safe. And here I thought we were best friends!”

“Ah...” Now an additional reason Teal was so mad was made clear. Teal saw

what he did as a *personal* betrayal as well.

“All of you, calm down!” the spokesman on the holovision shrieked. “If you would just think it through rationally, you would understand that this is our best course of action. President Lin will pay the utmost consideration to all of our government’s demands. In truth, as long as he doesn’t violate the orders of the Empire, he intends to follow the will of the star system’s government – the government of the people. I hope you realize that that wouldn’t be something we could hope of someone born a noble of the Empire. We can expect the maximum level of freedom afforded to any star system under the Empire’s control.”

“Malarkey!”

“How can we take you at your word!?” Some questions could be heard through the jeering outbursts.

“Where is President, ahem, Lord Lin currently?”

“Yeah, where is that lout!?”

“Errr...” The spokesman had reached a state of stammering previously unthinkable given his job performance up until that moment. “In order to iron out the particulars and to formally receive his peerage at the Empire’s capital, he headed to an Abh fleet flagship. He embarked on an Abh landing ship on the French Prairie, and he’s currently aboard.”

“So he scarpered off!”

“Must be why he put off the announcement for so long.”

“Wonder if he’ll be back?”

“Oh he’ll be back, surrounded by imperial guards.”

“No, even if he wanted to return, there’s no way he could. You think the Empire’d make him a noble that easily? Heh, looks like he himself got duped. Serves him right!”

“Everyone, please!” But the spokesman was waging a one-man battle. “Please, you must understand, the President made the decisions he made with the happiness of every citizen in mind, not for personal profit—”

Jinto couldn't take any more. He switched off the holovision.

"And that's how it is," said Teal. "This makes you the next in line for the lordship, you know. Oh my, how crass of me to address you in such a vulgar fashion. You are our '*Noble Prince*,' after all. I humbly beseech you, if you would be so magnanimous, forgive me my lapse in manners, Your Excellency."

Jinto tried to convince himself that it was all in good humor, but there wasn't a shred of levity on Teal's face.

"Stop it, Teal..." Jinto struggled to hold in the tears. "Why are you talking to me like that... It's not fair..."

"I know it's not." Teal kept staring straight ahead. "I know I'm treating you horribly. It's just, I can't get over it. Son of a... It may not look it, but I'm trying my hardest not to yell. Dammit, damn it all..."

The taxi-box entered Omni I's Nexus Floor. The elevator for the Presidential Residence would be arriving soon.

"There's only one thing I want to know..."

"What?" Teal looked his way.

"When you told Lina to run..." Suddenly, he lost the desire to finish asking the question. But there was no getting around it; he had to hear the answer. "...Did you tell her about the deal, too?"

"... No. It was being kept under wraps from the general public." That moment's hesitation mercilessly exposed his lie.

"I see..." Jinto could virtually hear the rattling as the world with which he was so intimately familiar — the world he loved — collapsed around him.

Chapter 1: Delktu Spaceport

The hustle and bustle hit his ears the instant he stepped off the *dobroriac* (DOHBROHREEA, elevator-tube) leading away from the planet's surface. Jinto stood still and looked around the waiting-plaza.

Is this what this place looked like? Jinto tried to recall what it had been like, back then.

It was his second time arriving at a *bidautec* (BEEDOHT, spaceport). The first time was seven years ago, when he'd arrived at this very **spaceport** on the planet Delktu from Martin (or *Martinh* "MARTEENYUH" as the Abh pronounce it).

His memories of that time, however, were quite fuzzy. He was sure he must have passed through here while he was following that stewardess on the *rébisadh* (REBEESAHDTH, cargo passenger ship), though.

All around the circular floor shot elevator-tubes connecting to various places within the port, and at the center lay the elevator-tube leading back to the surface that was also used for cargo. The sight reminded him of the Nexus Floor in the hybrid-functionality building in which he was born and raised.

The difference was that this place was a space for endless carousing. People, self-propelled vending machines, and more were milling around all the countless tables and seats. Of course, there were also people seated on those chairs, many tucking into the food and drink they'd purchased off the vending machines passing by while chatting cheerfully in a variety of languages.

The informational broadcast rose in volume so as not to be drowned out by the background music.

"The Lengarf Glorn, the *rébh* (REV, passenger ship) headed toward the *Laicerhynh Estatr* (LEKUHRRYOONYUH ESTAHT, Duchy of Estoht), is scheduled for a 17:30 departure. Customers who have not yet completed their check-in procedures, we urge you to do so soon, before proceeding to **elevator-tube 17...**" Either Delktunians knew how to kill time, or this was the norm across most of the spaceports of the *frybaréc* (FRYOOBAR, Empire).

Other passengers darted around Jinto in annoyance. Realizing he had become an obstacle in their path, Jinto started walking, too. The *dagboch* (DAHGBOHSH, self-propelled luggage) zoomed after him. Gravity here was maintained to be equal to that of Delktu's surface.

The hundred or so people who'd departed the surface aboard the elevator-tube got swallowed by the bustle, and in mere moments, Jinto was all by himself. Not that he hadn't felt alone even inside the tube. As a whole, Delktunians were friendly, but when it came to *him*, no one initiated any conversation. For instance, a group of three had been laughing and chatting until they caught sight of Jinto, after which they quickly cleared out to the side. When Jinto passed into view, the atmosphere around them grew tense.

Oh well, I guess only real weirdos would want to chat it up with somebody dressed like me.

The *sorf* (SORF, jumpsuit) he was wearing underneath was more than fine. It was the fashion of the day, after all.

The *daüch* (DAOOSH, long robe), on the other hand! Why in blazes did he need to parade around in a *daüch*!? It was absurd. The robe lacked sleeves, while its shoulders hung over each of his own in a V-shape. Held in place by the *ctaræbh* (KTAREHV, ornamental sash) tied around his waist, it widened from there until it reached his feet. It was a stark white, while its hem and collar bore thick bordering.

The *datycirh* (DATYOOKEERR, computing crystals) inlaid in his *creunoc* (KRYOONO, compuwatch) were green, identifying his family status as a newly ascended noble.

In addition, an elegant *almfac* (AHLFA, circlet) adorned his head. It was made to match Jinto's status, though he didn't know that. As it was vouched for by the *Gar Scass* (GAR SKAHS, Institute of Imperial Crests), one could only assume it was a good match for him.

This was the standard outfit among *rüé-simh* (ROOEH SEEF, imperial nobles).

In fact, this was the first day he'd ever put on the appearance of a noble. Granted, upon inspecting his reflection in the mirror, it wasn't as bad as he'd expected. If one didn't pay too much mind to how his shoulders were broader

than a typical Abh's, the look was tolerable, if only barely.

That being said, it was not at all common for a noble to be alone in a civilian spaceport, and his brown hair instantly gave him away as not being Abh.

"We thank all currently disembarking patrons for riding with the passenger ship Sellef Niziel. Welcome to the *Dreuhynh Bhoracec* (DROOHYOONYUH VOHRAHK, the Countdom of Vorlash)! The next **elevator-tube** will be departing for the surface in three minutes. The *baüriac* (BAOOREEA, connecting shuttle ship) for the planet Gyuxath will be..."

These announcements were also broadcast twice: The first time in Delktunian, and the second in *Baronh* (BAHROHNYUH).

Sure enough, there was a crowd that had just disembarked the Sellef Niziel, but they didn't seem to have any desire to get right on the elevator-tube. By all appearances, they instead planned to hold their first drinking party on Delktu at this geosynchronous orbital spaceport. They bought food and drink from the vending machines and spread them out on the tables.

Passengers who would soon be leaving this star system also drank together, and with great gusto. Jinto wondered how many people passed out drunk and let their ships slip away each day.

He couldn't blame them. Almost all of them were immigrants, and for them, this was the one and only time they'd ever travel through space. Small wonder, then, that they'd want to cut loose.

"Hey! Lin Jinto!"

Jinto thought he must be hearing things. Unlike on Martin, on Delktu an individual's family name came before their given name, so "Lin Jinto" was most definitely his name.

Not expecting much, Jinto searched for the source of that voice. If he hadn't been hearing things, he was sure to have simply heard someone wrong; failing that, there was somebody else with the same name.

So he thought, but when he made out a strapping young man occupying a round table for four by himself, he started beaming with a joy he couldn't see coming.

“Ku Durin!” Jinto called his friend’s name as he came to the table half-running. “What’re you doing in a place like this?”

“What am I doing? What else could I be doing here, ya blockhead? I’m here to see you off, dude. *Duh.*”

“I see! Thank you, man.”

“Or is the presence of a little urchin come to see you off *bothersome* to Mr. Fancy-shmancy Noble?”

Jinto laughed. “I said ‘thank you,’ didn’t I? Dumbass. You do know what the words ‘thank’ and ‘you’ mean, right?”

“I do when they’re *pronounced right*, ya phony immigrant. I’m surprised your accent never slipped out. Well, whatever, just sit down, would ya? I’m tired of waiting for you. Wasn’t it supposed to be an 18 o’clock departure? I wanted to see you off before you boarded, but I got here too early.”

“You should’ve sent me a message. I would’ve met up with you.” Jinto plopped onto a seat and took a look around expectantly.

“Ah, yeah.” Durin looked a little shamefaced. “I’m the only one who’s here to see you off. The others aren’t coming.”

“.....Oh.” He tried to conceal his disappointment, but he wasn’t very successful.

“To tell you the truth, I was a little uneasy myself. I was afraid you might just ignore me when I called you over.”

“What’re you talking about?” Jinto objected placidly. “C’mon, man, we’re *minchiu* mates and everything. I wouldn’t ignore you.”

“Yeah, and we never had another player as terrible as you,” Durin replied. But then, suddenly, his expression turned gloomy.

“Don’t blame them, all right? We were all shocked. I mean, we knew you were going to an Abh school, but we never dreamed you were so... *high-status*...”

“It’s fine,” said Jinto. “I was probably in the wrong for keeping mum. But would you have honestly let me be your friend if I’d told you I was a **noble**?”

“No.” Durin shook his head. “It’d be pretty hard to imagine.”

“Yeah.”

“Minchiu” was the most popular ball sport in Delktunian society, with teams of ten competing against each other. Not only were there professional minchiu teams, there were also regional clubs, as well as school and even company clubs. Jinto learned about the game in his school’s minchiu club, and discovered, to his surprise, that he had some talent at it, after which he joined the regional club. There he made loads of friends, starting with Ku Durin.

But Jinto had had a secret. He had pretended he was the child of an ordinary immigrant. A mere three days prior, Jinto confessed to his band of friends that he had to leave Delktu, and that he was in fact an *imperial noble*.

From the way the atmosphere soured, one might have thought he’d confessed to killing someone. He’d never forget their reactions for the rest of his days. Unable to stand the situation, he’d turned heel and fled.

“None of us knows how to hang with a **noble**. Forget nobles, we’d never even seen a *reucec* (RYOOK, landed gentry) before.”

“I get it, ‘cause not even I know how I’m supposed to be acting.”

“Sounds serious.” Durin nodded. “But ya know, those **noble** clothes really suit you.”

“Don’t go saying things you don’t actually believe, ya galoot.” Jinto flicked his **robe** with his fingers. “Give it to me straight, it looks like something out of a history play.”

“I’ve gotta say, I’m feeling good. It’s not often a poor surface-dweller boy gets to talk face-to-face with a high and mighty noble — and a *bhodac* (VODA, landed, high-ranked “grandee”) youth at that!” Durin looked around and said “Oh, looks like we stand out a bit, huh.”

“Stop it,” said Jinto, exasperated. “I know how I must look. I don’t look Abh, that’s for sure.”

To that, Durin didn’t respond. “So, you’ll be returning to your home planet, right?”

“Huh?” Jinto blinked. Now that he mentioned it, while Jinto had told them he’d be leaving Delktu, he never did inform them where he’d be going. “No, man. I’m going to Lacmhacarh (LAHKFAHKARR).”

“The *arauch* (AROSH, imperial capital)?”

“Right. It’s ‘study abroad’ for me once again, only this time around I’ll be attending a *cénruc sazoïr* (KENROO SAHZOEER, quartermasters’ academy).”

“The hell is that?” Durin stared back at him blankly.

“A school that trains administrative officials for the military,” Jinto explained. “Though I’ll be a *lodaïrh sazoïr* (LOHDAEERR SAHZOEER, starpilot quartermaster). Two months ago, I took the exam at the *Laburéc* (LAHBOOR, Star Forces) *banzorh ludorhotr* (BAHNZORR LOODORROHT, recruiting office), and I got in.”

“You’re gonna be a *soldier*?” His eyes opened wide, his surprise undisguised.

“Yep.”

“But haven’t you got your own *ribeunec* (REEBYOON, star-fief)? Why’re you going outta your way to...”

“I’m duty-bound, my friend. To inherit your *snaic* (SNEH, rank of nobility), being born into a **noble** household isn’t enough. You need to serve in the **Star Forces** as a **starpilot** for a minimum of 10 years. My father was already of advanced age, so they made an exception for him, but that won’t fly for me.”

“Guess **nobles**’ve got it rough, too.”

“Yeah. Seems like the higher your status in the **Empire**, the more obligations are thrust on you. I like it that way, though. It makes a lot more sense than the other way around. That said... it’ll actually be three years as an army trainee, and then ten years as a **starpilot**, for a total of thirteen years of army life. Kill me now.”

“But you *will* be returning to your home planet, right?”

“At some point, yeah. It is my **fief**, after all.” Though calling his home planet his “fief” felt weird.

“No, I’m talking about returning there *now*. You’ve been gone for a long-ass

time already.” Durin frowned.

“True, true.” Jinto hadn’t set foot on Martinh soil in seven years. It had been so long that he wasn’t certain he could even properly speak Martinese anymore. His only real lasting link with his home planet was the monthly tidings from his father. According to that correspondence, Teal Clint had become a leader in the anti-imperial movement. Jinto had no idea what had become of Teal’s wife Lina.

“Sadly, I’m not in any position to return at the moment,” he said, shaking his head. “It seems it’s not really a home for me anymore. The founding story of the *Dreughéc Haïder* (DRYOOZHEH HAEDEHR, Household of the Count of Hyde) isn’t a heroic one. It’s the tale of an original sin. The people of Martinh all hate me and my father.”

“Ah.” His expression was one of deep sympathy. Though they may have been the descendants of immigrants, Delktunians felt a fierce affection for their planet. Getting chased away from their land with hurled stones was their greatest fear. “But you want to be a *fapytec* (FAHPYOOT, lord) despite all of that?”

“I don’t *want* to be one,” he pouted, chagrined. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought about renouncing my inheritance rights. About becoming a citizen of Delktu and carrying on the same as ever. And even if I wanted to revert back to being a citizen of Martinh, it’s not like they’d forgive me anyway.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“My father persuaded me not to. Here’s the deal...”

The man formerly known as President of the Hyde Star System, Rock Lin, was now *Linn ssynec-Rocr Dreuc Haïder Roch* (LIN SYOON ROHK DRYOO HAEDEHR ROHSH, Count of Hyde). He’d persuaded his son of the merits of the following line of thinking: *The planet Martinh holds an important resource. That is to say, all the lifeforms that evolved in ways unrelated to Earth’s. Humankind has created all manner of mutant creatures, but the gene splicing guided by the superficial wits of man cannot compare, even meagerly, to the evolution wrought by nature over eons. The agth (AEETH, territory-country) newly*

christened the Dreuhynh Haider (Countdom of Hyde) is extremely rich and fertile.

*However, it is only through commerce with other star systems that those bio-resources can be our wealth. What do you think would happen if we left that exchange of goods to **the Empire**? There's no doubt they'd take a big bite out of it. They'd give the people nothing but their scraps, wouldn't you agree?*

As such, it was necessary for someone of the Hyde Star System to become its lord and take part in its trade.

"Well, I'm convinced," said Durin.

"Yeah, it's reasonable enough. That's why I'm staying a noble. Although, I've been having my doubts lately..."

"Doubts? About?"

"Think about it — it's impossible to be a citizen of Hyde and an Abh **noble** at the same time. I don't have any of the rights of a citizen of Hyde anymore. Sure, it'll be fine with my father at the helm for the time being, though he doesn't have citizen rights in Hyde either. But he's convinced that he's working for the benefit of the star system. I intend to work for the system, too. But what about the generation after me? My son or daughter would have their genes altered; they'll be born as a beauteous blue-haired Abh. That's the rule, and there's no getting around it. They'll also likely be Abh culturally. Would they be capable of putting themselves in the shoes of a Hyde citizen?"

"Dude, you're so damn stiff. Stop overthinking!" Durin looked at him dumbfounded. "That bunch of idiots hates you anyway, so forget about them! Point is, you're part of a *family business*, and *you* get to decide whether you take it up or not. Though if I were you, I wouldn't even think about handing over such a big business to someone else."

A "family business," huh. Never thought about it that way. Jinto felt as though he'd been thrown a life vest. Jinto was an only child, so if he didn't become the next count, then the Lin family line would terminate without ever accumulating much by way of tradition. But so what? Who exactly would cry over that?

"You're right. You're absolutely right."

“I’m always right.” Durin suddenly pointed toward his toes. “Look right here. This is my first time at a spaceport. From up here, I think our planet looks really pretty, too.”

It was then that Jinto realized the floor was projecting Delktu’s surface. A screen right around the same size as their round table was displaying video footage of the clouds drifting over the planet. The *arnaigh* (ARNEZH, geosynchronous orbital tower) bridging the surface and the spaceport tapered so thin it seemed a thread before getting sucked into the clouds, which gleamed with the light of their star, Vorlash.

“Yeah. It is pretty.” It dawned on him that he’d never looked down upon the surface of his true home planet, Martinh. The realization surprised him a little.

“By the way, how long’ve you been here? Five years?”

“Nah, been here for seven.” Jinto looked back up at him. “The invasion of Hyde happened in I.H. 945 (Imperial History, *Rüé-Coth* ROOEK KOETH).”

“So you came here right after they invaded? Am I remembering that right?”

“Yeah. I had no idea what was going on, they just shoved me on a *frach* (FRAHSH, traffic ship), and then whisked me away on a **cargo passenger ship** that was standing by in orbit. Let’s just say I learned what it felt like to be an animal dragged to a zoo.”

“But you had a retinue, right?” Durin bought some *surguc* (SOORGOO, coffee) from a passing vending machine and handed Jinto a can. “Take it, on me.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t worry about it. It feels good to treat a young master **prince** to a little something.”

Jinto smiled. “So yeah, about my ‘retinue’ — there was nobody there for me. Or at least, nobody from Martinh.”

“Whaaat? But that must’ve been a super raw deal. You were what, 10, back then?”

“Yeah, I was 10.”

“Whose bright idea was it to send a 10-year-old kid alone to a star system

dozens of light-years away?”

“Yep. So one of the stewardesses on the **cargo passenger ship** became a full-time attendant for me. I think she must’ve been asked to do so by my father. She took care of me in lots of ways, including bringing food to my cabin.”

“Wow, sounds swanky.” Durin looked a tad envious. “Must’ve been some high-class space travel.”

“It wasn’t.” He grimaced at the memories of that time. “Not least ‘cause I couldn’t talk to anybody. There weren’t any translation devices that could speak my home language then. She somehow managed by using a translation device for Ancient English...”

“Wait a sec. What’s ‘Ancient English’?”

“My home language is descended from Ancient English. But it’s not like I ever learned Ancient English, and now I’m way out of practice with my Martinese. It’s unintelligible to me.”

“So it’s just like Baronh.” The majority of Delktunians couldn’t understand Baronh, and Durin was no exception.

“Yeah, for the most part. Not that I really felt like chatting anyway. Aboard that ship, I kept quiet. I didn’t even take a single step outside my cabin.”

“Was that stewardess Abh?”

“No, I think she was a *rüé-laimh* (ROOEH LEF, citizen of the Empire), since she had black hair. Must’ve been from a *nahainec* (NAH’HEN, terrestrial world) somewhere. But that didn’t matter to me then. They were a crew of invaders to me.”

“Heh heh, if she’d been Abh, I’ve got a feeling you might’ve gotten attached to her.”

“Why’s that?”

“C’mon, you know how they say Abhs are all lookers. Guys and ladies alike! I don’t care how young you are, you’d be all about playing nice when a gorgeous young woman comes along.”

“Come on, dude.” Jinto became somewhat huffy. “When I look back, I can’t

help thinking I did wrong by her. I mean, she even went so far as getting off the ship to do my paperwork so I could enroll in school. And despite that, I don't even know her name. She probably did introduce herself, but her name was buried in heaps of either Barohn or Ancient English, both of which were babble to me."

"Huh. Well, whatever. By now, that stewardess has gotta be middle-aged anyhow. Unlike Abhs, us Landers are just gonna keep aging."

"For god's sake, is that the only way you can think about people? I'm trying to express my earnest gratitude to her as a person..."

"Yeah-huh," said Durin, trying to pacify him. "No matter what, I only ever think about pulling in the chicks."

"Good grief," Jinto readily agreed. "You're the type that honestly believes that any old person in the crowd that passes you by is the love of your life. It doesn't matter how tenuous the connection is, you never lose time trying to get in super-cozy with her."

"Okay, first of all, I don't just fall for '*any old person*.' She's gotta be cute, obviously. Second of all, I never think of her as the '*love of my life*.' I just want her to be with me for a single night, in fact."

"Hah!" Jinto clapped. "So what's your success rate?"

"A lot higher than you think, pal."

"Oh really? I've only ever seen you take out a girl once. Plus, according to what I heard when I asked about it afterwards, that girl was your little sister."

"Fine, then what do you think my success rate is?"

"Zero."

"Look. Compared to zero times, *one time* is infinitely huge."

"What?" Jinto looked taken aback. "Don't tell me you're into... *you know*..."

"Quit it. I'm trying to tell you I've won the heart of a maiden that's *not* my sister."

"But just the once, huh?"

“More than once!” Durin fumed. “You just happened to never be around.”

“That so? Hey, I’m willing to chalk it up to that for the time being.”

“Oh man, you can’t face reality, can you? Talk about averting your eyes from the truth. If I score with the ladies, what’s it to you?” Then, Durin looked as though something had suddenly occurred to him. “Ah, could it be!? Are you actually into... *you know...*”

“That’ll be enough of that.” Jinto knew Durin was just firing back, so he took it lightly. “I’ll have you know I’m a devout follower of the Hetero way. And no matter how thirsty I become, my faith shall hold strong. I will neither woo nor romance you.”

“I’m fine with it, honestly.” Durin’s eyes clung to him.

“If you liked me, you should’ve confessed to me sooner. Oh yeah, we’ve still got time. Let’s take a moment, before we part ways, to verify our romantic feelings...”

“In full view of all these people?”

“You think public view is any obstacle so long as you’ve got *love*?”

“You are surprisingly unrelenting, you know that. It makes me wonder whether you might secretly be a ‘pagan’ yourself.”

“Don’t be silly.” Durin dropped the gag. “‘Cause if you’re a devout Hetero, then I’m a crazed Hetero fundamentalist extremist.”

“Oh, I know.” Jinto drank the rest of his coffee and tossed the paper cup into the receptacle in the middle of the table. “Thanks again for the drink.”

“You don’t need to thank me for a **coffee**, young master **noble**.” Durin laid down the sick burn and, upon casting a fleeting glance to his right, gave the back of Jinto’s hand a little poke.

“What is it?”

“Have a look.”

Jinto followed Durin’s line of sight. Sitting by an adjacent table was a middle-aged woman with brown skin. She was taking an interest in his strange

combination of brown hair and **noble** attire so visibly that she was practically boring a hole in him.

If I were a real Bar simh (BAR SEEF, Abh noble), thought Jinto, how would I react in this moment? Would he have shouted at her, called her “insolent”? Would he have steadfastly ignored her? Or would he have shot her dead without a word?

But what Jinto ended up doing instead was flash her an ingratiating smile.

The middle-aged lady looked away slightly, as though she’d seen something she shouldn’t have.

Jinto breathed a sigh.

“That old lady’s hot for you, man. I’m jealous. You’re an *old-ladykiller*. I’ve got half a mind to stick your face over my own...”

“That’s not it. She was staring ‘cause a Lander wearing the garb of an **imperial noble** is as rare as a dog using *gréc* (GREH, chopsticks).

“But you’re really getting somewhere, buddy boy. For a Lander, that is.”

“I guess,” Jinto admitted.

Durin had a question for him. “Hey, I’ve only ever seen them on holovision — are Abhs really that attractive?”

Jinto cocked his head. “Couldn’t tell ya.” “I myself haven’t ever seen an Abh in the flesh.”

“But didn’t you attend an Abh school?”

“Wha—?” Jinto realized that his friend had been under a misconception. “Wow, I barely ever talked about my school life, did I? So get this: There isn’t a single Abh at the Abh Linguistic and Cultural Institute I went to. It’s all about educating candidates for naturalization as **imperial citizens**, and there are a lot of former imperial citizens among the faculty. The founders and principal went out there, and then came back. In other words, they’re *sohs* (SOHS, territorial citizens) of the **Countdom of Vorlash** that were formerly **imperial citizens**. Mind you, it’s not as though the **Empire** and the **Countdom of Vorlash** are linked in some special way; in the end, it’s a private school under the jurisdiction of the

Vorlash territorial government's Ministry of Education."

"I see. I took it for granted that it was an imperial academy."

"You think Abhs would throw any of their coin at a surface school?"

"When you put it that way, I guess not." Durin angled his head to the side in puzzlement. "But then, why did you come to Delktu? Shouldn't they have you taken you to an Abh school right off the bat? It's not like learning Delktunian's gonna do you much good, right?"

"Abhs don't go to elementary school. I'd have had to enroll in an institute of higher education, as a kid who was neither a prodigy nor understood any Baronh."

"For real? Then how do Abhs learn to read and write?"

"Their parents teach them."

Jinto recounted secondhand the info he'd learned in school. Abh society was aristocratic in nature, and so much weight was placed on each family's *ghédairh* (JEDERR, family traditions). In order to pass on those family traditions, parents needed to personally provide their children with an education. Apparently, the Abh thought it outrageous to allow children, whose personalities were not yet sufficiently concrete, to spend a significant amount of time under a stranger.

During their children's infancies, Abhs gave the task of educating them their undivided attention. **Nobles** with **territories** hired *tosairh* (TOHSEHRR, local magistrates), and even **gentry** took leaves of absence from their work duties, all in the effort to make their heirs more fit for the task.

Moreover, to transmit knowledge that the parent themselves had forgotten, they had *onoüaréiréc* (OHNOWAHRE'EEREH, mechanical teachers), as well as trips to camp for imparting group-living experiences.

"If you think about it the way they do, I've received a really warped education," said Jinto. "My father is the **Count of Hyde**, but there's no way he can be there to teach me the Abh way, so he thought at the very least he could have me learn Baronh and all the common knowledge stuff. That's why he dropped me at the nearest school for **imperial citizenship** aspirants."

“And so it’s been seven years since then,” Durin chuckled. “I thought you were smart, but it turns out you’re not that brainy.”

“I had to study and pick up material that was age-appropriate, so it took me all of that first half-year or so and a ton of sweat to learn Delktunian. For one, most of the students there were Delktunians.”

“Course they were. The only folks who’d study abroad on a **territory-country** out on the outskirts like Vorlash are country yokels.”

“You oughta say stuff like that only after I’ve returned home. Not even Delktu’s most amazing architecture can hold a candle to Martinh’s hybrid-functionality structures,” said Jinto in defense of his home.

“Not even this orbital tower?” asked Durin. He was so unfazed it was obnoxious.

Durin had hit a sore spot. As the latest news had it, there still weren’t even any prospects for the construction of an orbital tower on Martinh due to anti-Abh sentiment, despite the fact that every other inhabited planet within the Empire had one. To ride a spaceship there, one still had to rely on dangerous and costly traffic vessels. Even so, it seemed there were almost no candidates for space travel.

“C’mon, it’s not impressive, it’s just stupidly huge,” said Jinto, straining to come up with a comeback.

“Sure.” Durin didn’t rebut. He leaned his right elbow against the back of his seat. “Hey, that old lady’s staring at you again.”

“Must be this dumb hair.” Jinto combed up his hair. He was fed up.

Abhs kept their hair within tones of blue. However, “tones of blue” was an oversimplification; in reality, the colors they deemed appropriate for hair varied within the range of green to purple, to say nothing of all the different shades thereof. That said, brown hair was out of the question.

“You should’ve gotten it dyed. Should be easy enough.”

“Nah, though I did think about it...”

“Why not, then?”

“For starters, I was afraid I’d sort of delude myself into thinking I was a real Abh. I technically am legally, but genetically I’m a Lander.”

“‘For starters’? So, there’s more where that came from,” pressed Durin.

“Yeah, though I guess the only other reason is I’m stubborn. I may’ve stumbled into being an **imperial noble** by some cosmic mistake, but I don’t want people thinking I’m pleased about it.”

“Gotcha.” Durin leaned over the table, his expression unusually serious. “You know, about what you were saying before... if you wanna call it quits on the **noble** thing, then I’d stand by you, no problem. This is your last chance, isn’t it?”

“It’s not my last chance,” said Jinto. “I can withdraw from the aristocracy at any time.”

“Why not do it now, then? Is it ‘cause they’ll stop sending you your allowance?”

“That’s one reason.”

“I can look after you; just gotta get you a job, that’s all.”

Jinto was shocked. “But you’re still in school!”

“Yeah, but even kids in school’ve got their contacts. I know a manager who appreciates the position of low-income students. I won’t beat around the bush; he’s my uncle. Besides, you’re smart — you could get a government scholarship.”

“It’s all right. Thank you,” said Jinto. “I want to see the world of the Abh with my own eyes. I want to see how the people who invade and reign over us live their lives.”

“Guess that could be fine, too.” Durin shook his head, as if to call him eccentric in his curiosity.

“Besides,” Jinto continued, “You’re the only one who came to see me off.”

“That’s... uhh...” His friend had suddenly turned rather inarticulate.

“All the kids who hung out with me, were chums with me, back when I was just ‘Lin Jinto’... they all flew off the minute they found out that I’d omitted the

bit between my family name and my given name.” You’re the only one who forgave me for misrepresenting my identity. If I’m to ever live as a **territorial citizen**, I’d want to live right here on Delktu. But that requires giving things time to cool down.”

“It was a great opportunity to find out who your real friends are.” He smiled a weak smile. A smile that didn’t suit his typical self.

“It really was,” Jinto agreed gratefully. “If and when I come back, I might come to you for guidance.”

“You got it. Leave it all to me.” Durin puffed his chest out in pride. “When I’m out of school, I plan to form a business. And I’m gonna work you to the bone when you’re back here as a low-grade employee of mine. I’ll even use you in an ad while I’m at it. I can see it now: ‘Our company is staffing a former imperial noble!’”

“However will I thank you?”

Durin glanced at the giant clock hanging on the ceiling and said “Uh-oh, has it really gotten this late already? Shouldn’t you already be boarding? Which ship you taking?”

“The **imperial üicreurh** (WEEKREURR, warship).”

“Wha?”

“New students of the **military academy** have the right to hitch a ride on an **imperial** war-vessel. At first, I wrestled over the decision, but then I thought I might as well check out what it’s like aboard a **warship**, since I’m gonna be a **starpilot** and all. So, I chose to exercise my right.”

“Hold up, does that mean a **warship**’s gonna dock at this **spaceport**?”

“Beats me, man. Someone’s scheduled to come pick me up at 18 o’clock. And I’m here with the proper attire.” Jinto pointed at his **long robe**. “Easier to spot this way, they said. Kind of a facile idea for a race capable of prolonged interstellar navigation, huh?”

“Wait, so an Abh soldier’s gonna be coming?”

“Yeah; not sure if they’ll be Abh, though. A **Star Forces bausnall** (BOHSNAHL,

soldier) will be here soon, in any case.”

“Ah. In that case, I oughta retreat now.”

“Huh? How come?” said Jinto with some alarm. “Don’t you wanna drink in the sight of me getting *hauled off* by ‘em?”

“I’ll pass.” Durin rose from his chair. “The sheer patheticness’d make me spill tears of pity for sure.”

“That’s rich, coming outta Delktu’s most ruthless scoundrel,” Jinto replied as he, too, rose to his feet.

“Stop flattering me, you’re making me blush!” Durin extended his hand.

Jinto took it in both hands.

“What’s your formal name again?” asked Durin.

“*Linn ssynec-Rocr ĩarlucec Dreur Haider Ghintec* (LEEN SYOON ROHK YARLOOK DRYOOR HAEDEHR JEENT, Noble Prince of the Countdom of Hyde Jinto Lin, descended of Rock). I think.”

Durin goggled at him. “Whaddya mean, ‘I think’? It’s your name!”

“I’m not used to it. It feels like somebody else’s name.”

“All right then. From now on you’re ‘Lin COUGH Jinto.’ And you’d better remember my name. ‘Ku Durin.’ Thing of glory, isn’t it? It’s definitely loads easier to remember than ‘Lin Whosawhat Jinto.’”

“Dude. Like I could ever forget you. And you can drop the ‘Whosawhat.’ Just don’t forget the name ‘Lin Jinto.’”

“You can count on me, *Linn ssynec-Rocr ĩarlucec Dreur Haider Ghintec*.” Durin’s face curled up in a grin, as though boastful of his powerful memory.

Jinto returned the smile and let go of Durin’s hand.

“See ya. Break a leg out there.”

“You, too, man. Make sure you grow your company big enough so that I don’t have to worry about searching for work no matter when I return.”

“I told you, bro, you can count on me.” Durin spun on his heels.

Jinto watched him disappear down the elevator-tube, but he never looked back.

When he made to sit back down, the middle-aged woman from before came back into view. But she wasn't looking his way. Those blunt eyes were trained in the opposite direction.

Jinto's own eyes pivoted in that direction, as though drawn by a hook.

Someone slender with a skintight black jumpsuit and scarlet *üébh* (WEV, belt) caught his eye. They made a beeline towards him, drawing even more attention than when Jinto first appeared.

Black and red — the *sairhinec* (SERREEN, military uniform) of the **Imperial Star Forces**.

Chapter 2: The *Bénaic Lodaïrh* (BENEH LOHDAEERR, Apprentice Starpilot) The definition of “Abh” was laid down clearly and concisely in *Rüé-Razaimec* (ROOEH RAHZEM, Imperial Law). That is to say, it was a general umbrella term for *fasanzærh* (FAHSANZEHRR, the highest family or “imperials”), nobles, and gentry.

According to that definition, Jinto was, as the legitimate progeny of a **count’s household**, indisputably Abh.

However, the word “Abh” meant something else as well: It was also the name of their ethnicity. This double-meaning was not overly problematic by dint of the fact that Abhs-by-law were also typically genetic Abhs.

In other words, Jinto was the unfortunate exception. This gap was not something that could easily be covered up. After all, the difference between Abhs and Landers wasn’t on the level of divergent races or ethnicities, not truly. It was on the level of different species.

While clearly distinct from Homo Sapiens, it was almost certain that Abhs were descendants of Earth humans. The evolutionary split that produced this “mutant race” cannot have been spurred by a mere mutation, it was said, but rather can only have been brought about with an explicit plan in mind.

To back that claim, one needed only point to how even now, the Abh continued to dally with their genes. It was said that the genetic manipulation of newborn children was especially indispensable to them. If there was any deviation among 27,000 designated DNA sequences within a child’s nucleic acid molecules, it had to be corrected.

It was also said that this was in order to prevent congenital diseases and

maintain the uniformity of their race, but there was a more perceptive way of looking at the matter.

Rather, their thinking was based on a concept not unlike poetry with predetermined numbers of lines and rhyming patterns — when certain constraints are placed upon an art form, it can reach a higher level of sophistication.

Yes, the awareness of their children's genes as the subject matter of a work of art — this was the resonating verse of Abh culture. It wasn't mandatory — it was out of a simple sense of aesthetics that they touched up their children's genes.

Nor did they practice this genetic art with poor taste. They shared their sense of beauty with most **terrestrial worlds**, and no one ever pointlessly ran away with their own hideous predilections — or at least, they seldom ever did.

As such, the Abh comprised a collection of lookers so lovely that it was downright irritating.

The **soldier** of indeterminate gender coming Jinto's way seemed the epitome of Abh genetic artistry.

Their long bluish-black locks flowed behind them, and they wore a plain military-issue **circlet**. Their face was oval-shaped, and a light cocoa in hue. The pupils of the striking eyes aimed straight at him were like black agates. Their eyebrows, though thin, traced sharp and elegant lines, and their small nose was beautiful in its delicateness. Their full lips were tightly pursed.

The scarlet **belt** was the sign of a **starpilot**.

As for their age... It was said to be a nigh impossible task to judge the age of an Abh by their appearance. That was because they aged in a peculiar way. Up until around age 15, they aged just like their ancestors, but during the 25 or so years following that point, they only outwardly put on about 10 years. After that, they didn't show any signs of aging for the rest of their lives. Abh call the period of growth until age 15 "*zarhoth*" and the subsequent period before one's appearance stops changing "*féroth*."

The Abh were unaging, but contrary to what many Landers believed, they

were not immortal. Over time, nerve cell regeneration fatally muddled one's personality and memories. For that reason, it was said they had to make do with the same neuro-biology as their ancestors. Even Abhs couldn't survive the fraying of their brain cells.

In their pride, Abhs programmed their genes to freeze up the functioning of the area of their brains that governed breathing before their intellect faded away. Abhs also died of old age: they just did so between the ages of 200 and 250.

In other words, an Abh that appeared to be in their mid-20s could in fact be 40 or even 200 years old.

However, in this **starpilot's** case, there was no need to worry about getting their age too far off the mark. They were either somewhere around the end of their *zeroth* growth period, or the beginning of their *féroth* maturation period. They were most likely around Jinto's age.

They'd have to get closer before Jinto could be sure of their gender. His gut told him they were a she, but he couldn't be certain. It was quite common among Abh males to possess faces and figures that could pass as a beautiful young maiden's, even past age 200. Indeed, at this age, one couldn't tell whether they were a handsome man or a lovely lady.

But here they came, even as Jinto wracked his mind; here they came, parting the crowds with the larger-than-life presence they exuded. The way they walked was dashing and refined. Their head stayed almost completely still. She, or perhaps he, strode forward as though skating.

Jinto looked at the rank insignia on the chest of their black Abh **military uniform**. Though he only had a surface knowledge of rank insignias, there were some things he knew.

It was an inverse isosceles triangle with curved sides. Within its silver bordering roared the eight-headed dragon of myth, which stood as the *agh* (AHZH, crest/coat of arms) of the *Rüé-ghéc* (ROOEZHHEH, Imperial Household) and **imperial niglac** (NEEGLA, national coat of arms) — a silver *Gaftnochec* (GAHFTNOHSH). The base color of the lowest-ranked insignia was scarlet. It indicated one was a **starpilot**. There were no other lines or stars emblazoned on

their attire.

That meant they were an **apprentice starpilot**.

They were wearing a **starpilot**'s uniform, but they weren't formally a pilot for the time being. They were learning the ropes. That was the position that fresh graduates of a *cénruc lodaïrh* (KENROO LOHDAEERR, flight academy) took on for half a year, during which they did hands-on training aboard a **warship** or at a *lonidec* (LOHNEED, base).

Jinto was also able to glean that this **apprentice starpilot** was, in fact, a girl from how the insignia was modestly bulging out.

Seeing as he knew she'd come to pick him up, he ought to have walked toward her, but something about her had him overawed; he stood paralyzed.

In that time, the apprentice reached him and planted her heels right in front of him. "Are you *Linn ssynec-Rocr Dreur Haïder Roch-lonh* (LOHNYUH, the Honorable)?"

Jinto flinched at the unfaltering recitation of his long and laborious name. It took all his effort just to nod.

Her right hand flashed. Jinto sensed danger, so he reflexively took a step back. However, the apprentice had only moved her right hand to place her index and middle fingers to her **circlet**, the Abh salute of respect.

"I have come to greet you from the *résic* (RESEE, patrol ship) Goslauth. You will follow me." Her tone of voice was definitely a girl's, but her tense demeanor wouldn't have been out of place in a young man. Her voice was limpid, like plucking a harpstring wound tight enough to snap.

After finishing her salute, she turned her back and once again took brisk strides, as though she didn't much care whether Jinto followed her or not.

Anger seethed in Jinto's chest. It wasn't that he'd expected a lot. The dictionary definition of "*aïbss*" (AEEP, Lander [i.e., surface-dweller]) wasn't discriminatory per se, but from what he'd gathered reading his textbooks, Landers were the targets of the Abh's unspoken disdain. That's why he was able to brace himself a little. Of course, he was used to being treated differently from the rest. But everyone is born equal, and so he had no desire to live his life

groveling before people who held him in contempt.

He was sure the the duty of escorting the heir of some upstart Lander **noble** wouldn't be to the **apprentice starpilot** girl's liking. No, it wasn't just her; nobody aboard the patrol ship cared for the idea, so they pushed it on the lowest-ranked apprentice.

Jinto convinced himself that was the case. This had to be redressed: first impressions are crucial to interpersonal relations. Of this, Jinto was very sure; it was what he'd learned from his experiences on Delktu. It all started with the courtesy of introducing oneself.

"Wait, hold up!" called Jinto.

"What?" She turned back to face him.

"You know my name, right?"

"Are you not *Linn ssynec-Rocr Dreur Haider Roch-lonh*?" Doubt tinged the jet-black pupils that were staring back at him. It didn't seem as though she'd been mocking or looking down on him after all.

"Yeah, I am *Linn Whosawhat Ghintec*, but I don't know *your* name. I dunno what it's like for Abhs, but that's not something I can be comfortable just letting slide."

Astonished, she opened her large eyes even wider.

Was it rude to ask an Abh their name? Jinto felt a smidge uneasy. He may have studied Abh culture, but what he knew, he was taught by former **imperial citizens** at school. His knowledge could be incomplete.

However, her reaction far exceeded his expectations.

Elation broke on the **apprentice**'s mouth, and she puffed her chest. Her blue-black hair swept in the air, and the *cothec cisaiger* (KOTH KEESEGEHR, functionality crystals) at the ends of her *cisaigec* (KEESEGE, circlet-embedded access-cables) swayed like so many eccentric earrings.

"You will call me 'Lafier'!"

She's just saying her name — so why did it sound like a declaration? wondered Jinto. It was positively triumphal in tone.

“In exchange,” continued Lafier, “I would like to simply call you ‘Jinto.’ Agreed?” The instant he saw Lafier’s inquisitive eyes, the grudge he’d harbored in his heart melted away like so much snow tossed into boiling water. Her captivating eyebrows lifted in unmistakable apprehension, frightened and unsure what she’d do if rejected.

“Of, of course!” Jinto nodded enthusiastically. “I’d be grateful if you’d do that for me.”

“Well, greetings then, Jinto,” said Lafier. “Let’s go.”

“Right.” And so, now amenable, he followed Lafier.

“Jinto,” said Lafier. “There’s something that I would like to ask you.”

“What?”

“Earlier, when I saluted you, you stepped back. What was that?”

Jinto couldn’t exactly tell her that he thought she’d hit him, so he made something up on the spot. “That’s just how we greet people on my home planet. Old habits.”

“Ohh...” Lafier didn’t appear to doubt what he said at all. “Your home planet’s greeting customs are really strange. I had gotten the impression that you were guarding against some kind of attack.”

“You’re bound to think something you’re not used to seeing is odd, no matter the culture,” Jinto explained soberly.

“I see,” she said, nodding. “I grew up surrounded by other Abhs, so I don’t know much about foreign cultures.”

“Makes sense you wouldn’t.”

“That being said, you are also an Abh, Jinto. I think you ought to familiarize yourself with the ways of the *Carsarh Gereulacr* (KARSARR GUHRYOOLAHK, Kin of the Stars).”

Jinto groaned on the inside. That’s what the Abh dubbed themselves from time to time. The “Kin of the Stars.” It seemed they were rather fond of this poetic moniker.

But is regarding balls of vapor bereft of any feat apart from nuclear fusion as your relatives really all that much to be proud of? pondered Jinto. *Never mind that, has anyone ever tried asking the stars themselves what they think about all of this?*

However, the only words that passed through his lips were: “Easier said than done. Shaking off an upbringing that’s already ingrained is extremely hard.”

“That may well be.”

“It’s gonna be tough from here on out,” he said. He made sure to add a sigh to invite sympathy. That sigh belied his actual mood. He felt brilliant. His first encounter with an Abh had gone far better than he’d feared. After all, he’d managed to establish a first-name-basis relationship. Not only that, but he’d done so with a girl about his age. Any guy in his shoes who wouldn’t feel exhilarated needed to get checked for a sickness of the soul.

They stopped in front of the doors to **Elevator-tube** 26, standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Lafier fiddled with her **compuwatch**, and the doors opened.

Though the elevators headed towards the planet’s surface were each furnished with enough seating to accommodate around 100 passengers, this elevator didn’t contain any seating at all. Its interior was cramped, with only enough room for about 10 people.

“Say...” Jinto had chosen a safe topic of conversation. “That patrol ship... uh, what’s its name again?”

“The Goslauth.”

“Right, yeah, what *byrec* (BYOOR, fleet) does the Goslauth belong to?”

“It belongs to the *Byrec Claiär* (BYOOR KLEH’EEAR, Training Fleet).”

“So there must be a lot of **apprentice starpilots** like you on board, huh?”

“You lack common sense,” said Lafier reproachfully.

“Of course, it took all my effort just to learn the language. Plus, I’m almost all boned up on military stuff.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” Lafier frowned slightly. “Forgive me.” Jinto was left mystified as to whether that had been meant as an earnest apology.

The **elevator-tube** ascended two floors and came to a halt. Jinto got off after Lafier.

“There are *claiiagac* (KLEH’EEAHGA, training ships) within the Training Fleet, that much is true,” Lafier explained as they walked. “However, those are boarded by *cénh* (KENYUH, trainee pupils). **Apprentice starpilots** like me don’t go on those. The Training Fleet is trusted with a second mission. It hosts new, leading-edge warships that haven’t yet been formally assigned while they’re running familiarization runs. The Goslauth just got commissioned three months ago, and the *Sarérh* (SARERR, Captain) and everyone else aboard are practicing how to handle it.”

“Huh?” He was suddenly nervous.

“There’s nothing to fret over,” Lafier said, unsmilingly. “It’s a figure of speech. Excepting myself, there’s no one but experienced *saucec* (SOHK, crewmembers), and the first round of fine-tuning has been done. It won’t fall apart with you in it.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t worried or anything,” Jinto lied once again.

There were no civilian passengers that he could see on this floor. There were only officers in uniform. The wall beside the elevator-tube was curved, giving the impression that this was a rounded circular hallway.

After going around the elevator-tube, they came upon a hallway that led outside it, guarded by a pair of *sach* (SAHSH, non-commissioned crew, or “NCCs”).

Sach were not Abh. They were followers of the Star Forces, its low-ranked officers, and largely picked up from various **terrestrial worlds**.

The two NCCs standing guard saluted. “**Apprentice**, in accordance with regulation, allow us to inspect your **compuwatch**.” Lafier proffered her right arm, on which the compuwatch rested. The retainer placed an oblong device on the **compuwatch** and read what it displayed.

“You’re clear, **Apprentice**. Now then, if you would give us your compuwatch as well, Honorable *Lonh*.”

“Ah, right.” Jinto gave them his left arm.

While performing the identity check, the retainer took a glance at Jinto's face. He regarded him with suspicion, as though asking himself why somebody of his own race was a **noble**.

"You're clear, *Lonh*. Please, you may proceed," said the retainer, granting permission.

"Your work is appreciated," said Lafier, somewhat rotely. She urged Jinto forward.

When they set foot onto the hallway, it started to move forward. It wasn't a very long distance to traverse.

Jinto saw the words "*Baulébh Rüé-Laburér*" (BOHLEV ROOEHLAHBOOREHR, Administrative Zone of the Imperial Star Forces) written on the wall, and shuddered. He'd come here from a world where the concept of "the military" was found solely within the pages of history books and dictionaries. It was very late to be getting nervous about it now, but he couldn't shake the sensation that the time had finally arrived: he was officially involving himself with that great unknown, that veritable relic from the past.

There was a door at the end of the automatic path; it opened smoothly at their approach. A spaceship lay hunkered just beyond. Its painted black hull enveloped Jinto's field of vision.

"This is the **patrol ship** Goslauth?" asked Jinto earnestly.

"Tell me you're not seriously asking that." Lafier's eyes turned severe.

"Please remember, Lafier — I'm ignorant," said Jinto, flustered.

"There are limits to how ignorant one can be."

"Now that I recall, I think the **cargo passenger ship** I was on seven years ago was a bit bigger."

"I don't know what class that ship was, but it can't have been 'a *bit* bigger.' This is the Goslauth's loading *caricec* (KAREEK, small docking ship), one large enough to carry around 50 people. It's used to carry **soldiers** when a ship can't dock at a port directly, or to ferry them between ships. Though today, you'll be its only passenger."

“I’m honored.” But then, a pang of worry. *Wait, then who’ll be flying the thing? Is it Lafier!?*

He’d been harboring a firm preconception regarding *saidiac* (SEDEEA, steerers), and it definitely didn’t include girls his age. But he also had a feeling, bordering on a conviction, that testing that notion might end up delivering a fatal blow not only to the relationship that had thankfully started off on the right foot, but also to Jinto’s bodily form.

“So, which will you take?” she asked.

“What do you mean, ‘which’? I only see the one ship...”

“The assistant steerer’s seat is open. Will you be taking that seat, or would you rather stay in the accommodation compartment in the back?”

“Is there a lovely lady stewardess back there?” Jinto quipped.

“There’s no lovely stewardess,” replied Lafier with dead seriousness, “but if it’s a most beauteous **steerer** you want, you won’t be disappointed. So what will it be?” The “most beauteous **steerer**,” it would seem, was referring to herself.

I’m glad I didn’t ask if anybody else could steer, Jinto mused. *She would have definitely taken it as an insult.*

“I’ll take the assistant’s seat, obviously,” said Jinto, thereby resigning himself to leaving his life in her hands.

Chapter 3: The *Frymec Négr* (FRYOOM NEG, Daughter of Love) “So, what’s *frocragh* (FROHKRAHZH, spatio-sensory perception) feel like?” Jinto asked Lafier, sitting beside her in the assistant steerer’s chair.

“That’s difficult to explain.” Lafier had just extended her circlet’s access-cable and plugged it into her seat’s backrest.

“Is it true you know about everything around the spaceship using that?”

“Yes. Like this, I can sense what the ship senses.” Her eyes took on a questioning sheen. “Is *frocragh* that rare?”

“It’s rare all right,” Jinto replied with a shrug. “This is the first time I’ve ever met someone with it.”

Frocragh was a sense unique to the Abh. Abhs each bore a *froch* (FROHSH, spatio-sensory organ) on their foreheads. These *froch* were typically obscured by their **circlets**, and so Landers rarely got a chance to see them even in videos, let alone in real life. And Jinto was no exception.

The part of the **circlet** that touched the *froch* spatio-sensory organ contained approximately 100 million flickering light-emitters that picked up information from the ship’s own suite of sensors and beamed it to the area of the frontal lobe pertaining to navigation, or the *rilbidoc* (REELBEEDOH). That area of the brain was also unique to the Abh.

When connected to a ship, the **circlet** became a personal radar, continuously probing the space around the user. To the Abh, the circlets weren’t just indicators of family pedigree, but indispensable tools throughout their entire lives.

Jinto realized he’d misconstrued something. When they’d first come face to face, he’d thought that she’s tried to stomp off by herself without confirming beforehand whether he’d actually follow her. But Lafier had, in fact, been able

to sense him behind her through her *froch*.

“I see...” Yet Lafier was still nonplussed as to how to answer his question. “But there’s just no way I can explain what it’s like. I can’t imagine what it’s like to live without any sense of *frocragh*.”

“No, that makes sense. So, are you doing orbital calculations?”

“Orbital calculations?” Lafier looked at him blankly. “No, I’m not.”

“Then you must just be receiving raw numbers, huh.” He was slightly disappointed; he’d overestimated this “*rilbidoc*” area of the Abh brain.

“I’m not receiving any numbers, either.”

“But then, how are you determining the ship’s trajectory?”

“I just am. Think of it as intuition.”

“Intuition? As in, your gut!?”

“Right,” she replied, nodding matter-of-factly. “When you throw something, you aim using your intuition, don’t you? It’s like that. I determine the optimal trajectory and duration of propulsion instinctively, calculating all of it unconsciously. Is there something strange about that?”

“I find it positively uncanny. I mean, there have gotta be times when your aim’s off the mark.”

“Children may miss, on occasion. Be at ease.”

“I see...” But that didn’t give him much peace of mind.

Jinto scanned the *chicrh saidér* (SHEERR SEDEHR, steering room). *I was expecting the steering room of a spaceship to be more over-the-top.* The steering room was spherical in shape. Only the floor was flat. With just a screen in front of each of the two adjustable seats, the room lacked the steering apparatuses and meters and instruments he’d imagined. It was just a smooth, opal-colored wall.

Behind the seats hung the *grac monger* (GRAH MOHNGAR, the ship’s banner), of the **patrol ship** Goslauth. Its design featured a *lauth* (LOHTH, winged dragon). The upper left arm of Lafier’s military uniform also featured the same symbol.

The steering apparatus was attached to the seat. The adjustable seat had an armrest on its right side, upon which lay a number of *poch* (POHSH, controls). Naturally, those controls couldn't be enough to carry out the complex operations necessary to pilot a spaceship. *That must be the guhaicec* (GOOHEK), thought Jinto.

Jinto fixed his eyes on the *guhaicec*, the gauntlet-looking device hanging on the left of the adjustable chair. It looked long enough to cover the arm up the elbow, with an opening for the **compuwatch**'s display and controls. It was made of black synthetic leather, but it sported many metal parts as well. The fingers, especially, were completely covered in metal.

It was said that Abhs guided their spaceships through the use of these control gloves, as well as through voice command. The buttons on the armrest were strictly for auxiliary, backup purposes. Jinto had learned of the **control glove** at the Abh Linguistic and Cultural Institute on Delktu, but he still couldn't believe a spaceship could be maneuvered through the simple movement of the pilot's fingers.

"Hey." Jinto had a question for Lafier, who had equipped the control glove. "Do you ever accidentally pick something up in your left hand while wearing that glove?"

"I forget all about my left hand while flying the ship," she said.

"But I can't help thinking moving your fingers is a silly way to pilot."

"Why?" Lafier cocked her head in puzzlement. "Is there a better way?"

"I think so. When Landers pilot intrasystem spaceships, it's more... well..." He was about to say, "more *self-respecting*," but he stopped mid-sentence. Best choose his words carefully. "It's just, I heard those ships come attached with maneuvering gear laid out according to different ideas."

"That may be, but this method is superior." The **apprentice starpilot** pointed to her left arm.

"But..." Jinto persisted. "It must be hard to remember how you're supposed to be moving your fingers. Do you not forget from time to time?"

"Do you spend time thinking about the movements of your muscles when you

walk?”

“No.”

“You aren’t normally consciously aware of how you’re walking.”

“No, can’t say I am.”

“Indeed not. And likewise for me when I fly a ship. I need only think of what I wish the ship to do.

Then my fingers move automatically. Thinking about it would only lead to hesitation as to how to move them. It would be counter-productive.”

“I see. It’s the fruit of your training.” Jinto was impressed.

“I’ve been doing this since I was a child. It goes beyond mere training.”

“That so?” Jinto was wracked by an inferiority complex, but at the same time, he was overjoyed at how correct he’d been not to ask her if there were any other **steerers** aboard.

“Shall we depart?” asked Lafier.

“Ah, yeah, of course. Whenever you’re ready.”

The screens shined bright, and the curvy glyphs of Baronh, called “*Ath*” (ATH), started flowing from bottom to top.

“Can you read that? It’s shooting so fast.” Jinto was peering at his own display monitor. The green glyphs were dashing across the screen at such absurd speeds he could only make out a mass of flickering. He couldn’t read any of it at all. He couldn’t necessarily say it was because he just wasn’t accustomed to it.

“I can’t read it.” Lafier took her eyes off the screen, quick to acknowledge that fact.

“All right then,” said Jinto, pointing to the screen, “what’s this for?”

“**Computing crystals** are checking over the ship. If there’s anything wrong, it’ll stay on screen as red text.”

“Then there’s no reason for all that other info to run across the screen, surely.”

“Some people agree with you,” Lafier acknowledged. “I don’t think it’s particularly bothersome either way. And I like the ‘vibe’ it gives.”

“Can’t argue with that.” At last, the little green glyphs cleared off the screen, to be replaced by a big flashing “*gosno*” (“nothing abnormal detected”).

“There you go, it’s run its course.”

“Seems simple enough.”

“Yes. It’s thanks to the **crystals** doing our work for us.”

“There must be times the machines get things wrong.”

“But humans make mistakes, too,” Lafier said to reassure him.

“Well, *that* makes me feel relieved.”

“You are quite the worrier, aren’t you? Our destination is right there. Do you think we could stand to rely on machines that break that easily?”

“Well, when you put it that way,” he said prudently. “But how far is it from here to there?”

“A meaningless question. Our destination is also in motion. In terms of altitude difference, we’re about 5 *sedagh* (SEDAHZH) apart.”

The Abh inherited Earth’s CGS system of units, with its centimeters, grams and seconds, though it seemed they’d felt a great need to turn the words into their own native vocabulary. 5 *sedagh* were exactly equivalent to 5,000 kilometers.

From here to there — from the **spaceport** to the patrol ship — stretched at least 5,000 kilometers of empty space.

*To the **Kin of the Stars**, that distance wouldn’t even be a stroll’s worth,* thought Jinto. *It wouldn’t kill them to be a little more humble with regard to the universe.*

With a flex of her left hand’s fingers, the **apprentice** bade the “*gosno*” on screen disappear. Now the screen displayed the bust of a spaceport crew member.

“*Belyséc* (BELYOOSEH, Flight Control),” hailed Lafier.

“Delktu 1st Planetary Spaceship Flight Control Center,” the controller replied.

“This is the **patrol ship** Goslauth’s **docking vessel**. Our *Paunoüass* (POHNOWAHSS, Ship Command) *ftalia bausnall* (FTAHLEEA BOHSNAHL, soldier number-code) is 01-00-0937684. Please depressurize Military *Beth* (pier) 2.”

“Roger that, Goslauth **docking vessel**. I’ll depressurize right away.”
Depressurized though it may be, it was impossible to tell what it was like outside from within the **steering room**.

“Wait, do you not know what it’s like outside?” asked Jinto. He wanted to have her pull up video of the outside on the screen. It was his second-ever time on a small ship, but he didn’t really remember his first time, so it might as well have been his first time. He felt a little anxious, but he was also brimming with curiosity.

“You want to see?”

“Yeah. I don’t have *frocragh*.”

“I see.” A shadow of sympathy flashed over Lafier’s face. “All right.”

Apart from the screens and the **ship’s banner**, the surrounding wall grew transparent. Of course, it hadn’t actually started letting light through. It was processing the footage of the outside and providing stereoscopic imagery.

This “depressurization” proved a massive disappointment. The whole compartment must have been thoroughly clean; no motes of dust hovered in the air. He understood that the air was getting thinner on an intellectual level, but nothing he was seeing lent that appearance.

After about a minute, **Flight Control** apprised them that depressurization was complete.

“Please unlock Military Beth 2’s *sohyuth* (SO’HYOOTH, lock gate),” Lafier requested.

“Roger that, Goslauth **docking vessel**.”

Now *this* was a sight to see. The right and left sides of the wall before them opened up. What lay beyond was a sea of stars.

“Total aperture confirmed. Requesting permission to leave port.”

“Permission granted, Goslauth **docking vessel**. Do you want an electromagnetic push?”

“No need. I’ll exit through cold propulsion,” she said. “You’d probably hide your eyes during an EM push,” she teased Jinto.

Yeah, I probably would, thought Jinto.

“Roger, Goslauth **docking vessel**. We hope you return to your warship safely. Delktu 1st Planetary Spaceship Flight Control Center, over and out.”

“You have my thanks. Goslauth **docking vessel**, over and out.” When the *belységac* (BELYOOSEGA, Flight Control officer) disappeared from the screen, Lafier’s left hand took to dancing once again. The vessel shuddered, and then rose up.

Jinto was on tenterhooks, fearing a collision with the ceiling. Lafier concentrated on her *frocragh* spatial awareness, going as far as closing her eyes, which was more than enough to get Jinto trembling.

Needless to say, his fears were groundless. With exquisite equilibrium, the vessel soared both up and forward, and a mere instant before it would have hit the ceiling, crossed over into the starry fathoms. It felt as though his body was floating up along with it.

They’d broken free of the sphere of *üameloth* (WAHMLLOTH, gravitational control) exerted by the **orbital tower**. Thanks to his *apymh* (AHPYOOOF, seatbelt), he didn’t actually start levitating.

The steerer’s seat rotated 90 degrees. He could see the orbital tower jutting perpendicular to his feet, and Delktu’s surface sprawled ahead of him.

“You’re incredible.” Jinto’s praises were heartfelt.

“What do you mean?”

“As in, you’re an amazingly practiced hand at this.”

“Don’t mock me,” Lafier huffed. “Among the Abh, even children can fly a ship like this.”

“Sure, right, I mean, yeah, of course.” His inferiority complex bubbled back to the fore. “But you’re really young, though. Sorry, I know it’s rude to ask a girl

her age...”

“You’re trying to tell me I’m childish, aren’t you?” If looks could kill...

“Don’t be crazy.” *Is there anything in all of space that’s easier than raising her hackles?* thought Jinto. “I’m *trying* to say that, like, it’s hard to tell how old you people are, so I just wanted to confirm my hunch...”

“I see.” The girl **apprentice**’s mood had swung right back around. “You inferred correctly. I just turned 16 this year. I *am* really young.” *Which makes her a year younger than me.*

“But what would be rude about asking?” said Lafier.

“Huh?”

“You said that asking a girl her age would be rude. But why would that be the case?”

Jinto batted his eyes. Now that she mentioned it... why *was* it rude? “It’s probably because ladies want to be seen as young. At least, the ladies of Delktu and Martinh do.”

“Intriguing. Why is that?”

“Couldn’t tell you. I’m no expert on female psychology, so try asking a Lander girl.” He saw Lafier wasn’t exactly satisfied by this response, so he attempted to change the subject. “Are **apprentice starpilots** all as young as you are?”

“No,” Lafier answered proudly. That made her come across as all the younger. “The exam for the **military academy** isn’t that difficult. It’s so easy that if you don’t pass it at 18, you ought to give up on functioning in respectable society. However, there are few who win admittance at age 13. Of this I can be a little proud, don’t you agree?”

“Yeah.” Jinto felt a childish compulsion to measure up against her. “I’ve got things to be proud of, too. I had to learn two different foreign languages at the same time, but I still got accepted to a **quartermasters’ academy** at 17.”

“Yes, that is amazing,” said Lafier, genuinely impressed.

Suddenly, a *BREEE* noise blared through the cabin. “What was that!?” It sounded to him like an alarm.

“We’ve entered a sector where we can accelerate.” Lafier kept manipulating her control glove as though it were nothing.

“Ah.” Jinto pushed down his embarrassment. “How long will it take?”

“I’m afraid this ship isn’t equipped with anything nifty like a *üameriac* (WAHMREEA, gravity control system), so it depends on what level of acceleration you can withstand.”

“I grew up on a planet’s surface,” bragged Jinto. An Abh’s *daimon* (DEHMOHN, standard gravity level) was said to be about half of Delktu’s. “If you can withstand it, then so can I.”

“I see. In that case, it won’t even take seven minutes.”

“Wow, that’s fairly fast.”

“It’s not far at all.”

“I hear you.” He realized he might need to flesh out his sensation of cosmic distances sooner rather than later.

The seats automatically increased in length, becoming something akin to bunks. Because the ship’s direction and rate of acceleration could change at a dizzying pace in accordance with the exerted attitude control, it was easy to feel knocked around. That said, that only lasted for a fleeting moment.

“Let’s go.” The instant Lafier said that, Jinto was pressed against the back of his seat.

“Wha, what is this!?” His chest was ready to burst from the acceleration forces that had far exceeded his expectations.

“*Caïmcoth* (KAEEMKOTH, acceleration),” said Lafier nonchalantly. “You aren’t going to tell me you didn’t know about acceleration, I trust.”

“I do! I know about it! But, not *this* fast...” He was finding it difficult even to move his lips. He could tell by the numbness in his extremities that his blood vessels were being crushed. He could probably endure a minute of this, but seven minutes would be well beyond him. “You, you’re fine!?”

“I’m fine. Our ancestors didn’t have any **gravity control systems**, so we built out bodies to be able to work under both high gravity-forces and microgravity. I,

too, have inherited those genes. It's all in the skeleton and circulatory system. In other words..."

He was in no mood to listen to an elaborate explanation. "Please, Lafier, shift the acc-acceleration down a little..."

"It'll take longer."

"Would that land us in hot water somehow!?"

"Not particularly. The ship's schedule was compiled to allow for extra time. For veteran navigators, allowing some leeway is practically a requirement. One can never know what's coming, after all."

"Good. I'm begging you..."

"Okay. It can't be helped." She stopped accelerating. "Now I have to change course. Can I accelerate just a little?"

Jinto shook his head. "Yeah, you can go a little faster than that. Just enough so I can bear it a bit more easily than before."

"Mmm." Lafier's fingers flitted in the air.

It began accelerating once again. It was still more severe than the planet Martin's level of gravity, but it was no longer a trial to endure. He could probably even walk around if he wanted.

"How is it now?"

"This is good."

"But it'll take a lot more time now."

"No other choice," replied Jinto. "I'm not in a hurry anyway. What's our gravity level?"

"4 *daimon*. The standard for when Landers are aboard. For longer journeys, we drop it down to 2 *daimon*. That's around where the gravity level of most **terrestrial worlds** is."

"You should have warned me that it'd be too much for a Lander," said Jinto ruefully.

"I thought you had intimated you were made of hardier stuff," said Lafier,

making it clear she had no malicious intent.

“Honestly, I should thank you for overestimating me.”

“Besides, you aren’t a Lander. You’re an Abh.”

“Well, it’s annoying, but I really don’t feel like one, since genetically I’m 100% Lander. You must get that.” The law could call him an Abh all it wanted, it didn’t change his genetics. To raise an extreme example, obtaining legal recognition as a bird would not allow him to take flight.

“Genetics aside,” said Lafier, “I think you ought to become Abh in terms of your attitude. An **imperial noble** wouldn’t lose their composure over something like high acceleration.”

“I’ve taken your words of admonishment to heart,” he said, chastened. He’d anticipated that he wouldn’t be cut out to be an **imperial noble**, and now that feeling had morphed into a strong conviction. He contemplated having them send him back right now so he could ask Durin for a job.

However, it’d be a bitter pill indeed to tell everyone he’d turned back.

At last, there were several seconds of microgravity and attitude control, and the vessel shifted to decelerating. The planet Delktu, floating above them, had become an orb speckled with white and blue. Jinto was assailed by the illusion he was falling without end.

“Hey,” said Jinto. “What’s your position in society?”

“Why are you asking me something like that?” Lafier asked back chidingly.

“I, uhh...” Jinto panicked. It seemed that she’d mistaken him as trying to flaunt his own position as a noble. “I was just wondering why someone so young joined the **Star Forces**, that’s all. I thought maybe you were planning to get your duties over with quickly like me. Was it rude of me to ask?”

“It wasn’t, but I don’t want to talk about it. Until I become a *fsætdorariac* (SEHDORAREEA, imperially certified pilot), and as long as I’m wearing this **military uniform**, I can’t wear anything that shows my family lineage.”

“So you’re saying that within the **Star Forces**, your social standing doesn’t matter?”

“Correct. In the military, this is what means everything.” Lafier pointed to the rank insignia on her left arm.

“I understand. It’s just, I only wanted to ask you why you wanted to join. Was it out of obligation, or because you wanted to?”

“I am obligated,” Lafier acknowledged.

“Ah, I knew it.” Military service wasn’t imposed on mere **gentry**. To them, admittance to an **academy** was a right, not a duty. He took this as confirmation that Lafier must be a young maiden of none other than noble stock. “I thought as much.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing...” he said evasively. He had guessed she might be of noble birth, but since that hunch was based on his impressions of her — namely, that she seemed haughty even when not speaking, to say nothing of when she opened her mouth — he thought it wise to keep mum.

Thankfully, she didn’t pursue the matter. “It’s not just out of obligation, though.”

“Why actually, then?”

“I wanted to come of age as soon as possible.”

“Ah, I see.” If one received an appointment as a **starpilot**, they were summarily recognized as an adult. “Was there really any need to hurry past your childhood, though? Living a life of comfort as a kid’s pretty sweet, you know.”

Lafier chewed it over, and then, at last, settled on a response. “Do you have any secrets regarding your birth?”

“Secrets regarding my birth?” replied a disconcerted Jinto. “No, no secrets. I mean, my mom died when I was little, but apart from that...”

“Your *mother*? I thought your parent is male. The Count of Hyde, *Dreuc Haider-lonh*, is your father, no?”

“That’s right, he’s my dad. Ah, I understand your confusion now...” Jinto recalled the structure of the Abh family unit.

The Abh did not marry. In Abh society, lovers' couples did sometimes live together. It was not uncommon for these partnerships to last long enough to be quite like a marriage, and on very rare occasions, they even lasted "till death did them part."

However, this was not an *institution*. It was simply one of many ways to live one's life. To burn with maddening passion, and then for that passion to go up in flames with nary a trace left — this was the typical form of Abh love. It was likely difficult for the Abh, who lived "forever young," to latch onto the ideal of marriage, premised as it was on growing old together.

As such, single parents were commonplace, and there was no concept of two-parent units. This, of course, would make an Abh's one parent either male or female, lending the phrases "Mama's boy (*frucec saranr*, FROOK SAHRAHN)" and "Daddy's girl (*frymec loranr*, FRYOOM LOHRAHN)" altogether different meanings. They now meant "a boy with a female parent" and "a girl with a male parent."

"You've heard of 'the institution of marriage,' right?" asked Jinto.

"Yes, I have. Ah, I was being absent-minded. You were raised a Lander, so of course."

"Yep, I'm the product of a marriage. The son of both a father and a mother at the same time."

"I see." Lafier cocked her head. "What is it like to have two parents? When your mother died, were you sad?"

"Well..." Surprised by the bluntness of the question, Jinto nevertheless searched his memories. What met him wasn't the mother he'd only ever seen on holovision, but the face of Lina Clint. "Yeah. Yeah, it was sad."

"Forgive me. It was a foolish thing to ask." Lafier cast down her eyes.

"It's fine, honestly. It happened when I was so young, I don't really remember much, to tell you the truth."

"However," said Lafier with palpable envy, "that means you can't have any secrets regarding your birth."

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“If both of your *larlinec* (LARLEEN, gene donors) were in your house, then how could there be anything hidden about your birth?”

“You’ve got it wrong.” Jinto was stumped as to how to correct Lafier’s misunderstanding. “I don’t know what it’s like on other **terrestrial worlds**, but on planets like Martinh and Delktu, a child can be born without one or both of the parents wanting it that way. Plus, in the past, there were people who wanted to be parents but couldn’t. So that’s how there can be some secrecy regarding birth. I’m sure there are more examples of how that can come about, too.”

“Such as?” Lafier didn’t hide her bewilderment.

“That, you can look into yourself. It can get really complicated. What is all this about ‘birth secrets,’ anyway? What does it have to do with you joining the military?”

“I do have a ‘birth secret.’ I had no idea whether I was a *frymec négr* (daughter of love). You can imagine how ill at ease that made me.”

“A ‘**daughter of love**’...” It sounded like some religious term to him. Despite the fact the Abh were areligious, that is. “What’s that mean, exactly?”

“You don’t know?” Lafier looked startled.

“I’m beginning to realize my education was lacking in certain aspects...” said Jinto, but it smelled of making excuses.

Though it was technically an Abh linguistic and cultural institute, the lessons centered mostly on the Baronh language. As for how they conducted their cultural instruction, they settled on briefly touching upon general manners and the like. There were no lectures on the core tenets of Abh culture.

He’d asked his teachers questions, and hit his books, but he never found anything too concrete. The information circulated by official documents on matters such as political organizations and the law was fine, but any information that looked closely into the daily lives of the Abh was a confusing tangle. Jinto had had no clue which claims he ought to believe.

Half of the blame for that fell on the Abh themselves. It was not as though they deliberately concealed the particulars of their culture, but there was a distinct dearth of enthusiasm to explain any of it to the uninitiated.

All in all, because the teachers had only worked alongside Abhs temporarily, they had done nothing more than look upon their world from the outside. The books had been published by former **imperial citizens**, not by Abhs. Some authors who had never even left Delktu got what amounted to irresponsible speculation and yellow journalism published as legitimate sources of information in those books.

Abhs hardly ever spoke about themselves to Landers.

“...And that’s why there are still some things I still don’t get about the way family works in Abh culture. Everybody knows Abhs don’t marry, but so how do they have children?” Fearing he might have touched on a sensitive topic, Jinto scanned Lafier’s expression.

Lafier seemed quite unfazed. “I see. So you don’t know anything about how we’re born...”

“Yeah, that is, uhh...” Jinto struggled for words, his face red. Just his luck; he’d somehow stumbled into asking her the age-old question, ‘where do babies come from?’ He thought he’d grown past needing to ask that particular question. To think he’d end up posing the question to a girl. A girl younger than him, at that. “I know you people don’t conceive in the womb...”

“There are some who choose to do so.”

“Really? But what about the **gene donors**, then?”

“The embryo gets taken out temporarily. Usually it’s transferred to a *ïanh* (YAHNYUH, artificial womb), but some women who want an exotic experience have it returned to the womb.”

“I see.” And so he learned a hidden truth of the Abh. The rumor on Delktu had it that Abh women had no wombs.

“But conception using **artificial wombs** is the norm, yes.”

“Gotcha.” Jinto shrugged. “Now you must understand why even if I tried

acting like an Abh, it'd be a waste of effort. It's like your entire race has 'birth secrets.' I tried looking into it, but there were so many dodgy, ridiculous accounts. Some said that you make offspring out of your own 'branches,' or that you mix together complete strangers' genes, or that you combine your genes with someone of the same gender, or that you even mate with relatives. Seriously, how do they come up with this stuff...?"

"We do all of those things," Lafier butted in.

"Wha?" Jinto's jaw dropped.

"Some people simply clone themselves, or else edit only a few genes. Some gather the genes of other people. It's up to each individual's free choice."

"For real?" Jinto was flummoxed. "But don't you put a premium on family lineage? From what you just said, I'd be of half a mind to think you ignore blood ties altogether."

"What's held in highest importance in each household is the inheritance of its **family traditions**, not the inheritance of genes."

"Wait, but—"

"A parent becomes a parent by polishing their child's genes and raising them up."

"Hmm. I understand." After a moment's contemplation, he looked convinced. It may be only natural for the Abh, who practiced gene alteration on an everyday basis, to slight blood relationships.

"That being said, the most common way to have a child is by combining your genes with the genes of someone you love."

"I'm relieved to hear that," said Jinto.

"Of course, there are times when someone loves another of the same sex, or a close relative, or more than one person at a time. I've heard that when people from terrestrial worlds are told this, it agitates them for some reason." Lafier cast Jinto's face an inquisitive look.

"It'd agitate them all right," Jinto assured her. "I'm in a pretty big tizzy myself."

“I find that strange. It’s not as though we have a monopoly on genetic engineering.”

“I can’t speak for others,” said Jinto with discretion, “but at least on the **terrestrial worlds** I know, it seems people wouldn’t really think tampering with people’s genes is a praiseworthy pastime.”

“So it would seem.” Lafier suddenly shot Jinto an angry look. “Let me warn you that I’m not dispassionate about it, either. If you give it a moment’s thought, you’ll come to my realization that this isn’t a discussion two people in a sealed space should be having.”

“I’m sorry.” So the Abh felt that way, too. Jinto did his best to retain his composure.

“In any case, telling someone that you want their genes is the one of the most earnest ways to confess one’s love.” There was something *dreamy* in her tone.

“Interesting.” It was like the “*will you marry me?*” of the Abh.

“A child born under those circumstances is called—”

“I know what you’re going to say,” Jinto interrupted. “She’s called a **daughter of love**, right?”

“Yes. And a boy is called a *frucec négr* (FROOK NEG).” Their awkward yet fascinating conversation had seemingly come to an end. The tension in Jinto’s body released.

“But couldn’t you just *ask* your father?” Then he got a start. “Hold on, your father isn’t...”

“Hmm?” Those deep, jet-black eyes pointed his way. “Ah, no, my father is still alive. And at this rate, he’ll be hale and healthy for another 200 years. Is that what you were thinking?”

“You got me.” It seemed she’d read into his little pause. “Then why haven’t you asked him?”

“Do you think it didn’t cross my mind?”

“Well, no...”

“My father wouldn’t tell me!” she raged. “He was obsessed with the notion that birth secrets lead to the child developing a ‘fuller personality’!”

“And there was no way to look it up?”

“Once you become an adult, you can browse your genetic record, and no one can interfere. But until then, you need your parent’s permission.”

“Aha, so that’s it.” It finally made sense now. He put the pieces together: She wanted to come of age as quickly as she could in order to discover the origins of her genes.

“I didn’t even fully believe the reason he gave for hiding it. I think he perhaps kept birth-secrets solely to wind me up.”

“But why?”

“I’ll never forget it. When I was a child, I wanted him to tell me that I’m a **daughter of love**, so I was always badgering him to show me my **gene donor**. But he just refused to reveal them. Until one day, he finally agreed to bring my gene donor for me to meet. What do you think happened then?”

“Did he not bring them after all?”

“No, he committed a far more insidious act. He tricked me. He held Horia in his arms and said, ‘Say hello to one half of your genes’!”

“Who’s Horia?”

“Our cat!” she spat bitterly.

Jinto burst out laughing. “Tell me you didn’t believe him, Lafier!?”

“It’s not impossible.” Lafier watched Jinto’s mirthful grin with resentment.

“What, really?” The outer corners of Lafier’s eyes were high on her head — not at all unlike a cat’s eyes. “You people go *that* far?”

“It’s against the law. It would be unethical.”

“I’m glad I’ve found a point of moral agreement with you people.”

“You are Abh, too.”

“Ah, right, right.” Jinto didn’t deny it. “But then, wasn’t it obvious it wasn’t

true?”

“I was eight years old. Of course I wouldn’t be very interested in legalities.”

“You’ve got me there.”

“I cried that whole night. Horia is a nice cat, but I couldn’t stand the idea that half of me came from it.”

“I totally understand..... Okay, maybe not *totally*, but I understand.”

“And the thing I could stomach the least, was how my own father was a degenerate who enjoyed creating cat-children!” Lafier’s right hand swung animatedly in the air.

An unspeakable anxiety came over Jinto, who looked at the **apprentice starpilot**’s left hand. The **control glove** on her left hand was so still, it was as though it was held in place by glue. Relief washed over him.

“Horia was only a kitten when it came to our home, and what’s more, I remembered the day it joined our family. And yet it took a whole night of tears for me to realize that.”

“Hey, all’s well that ends well, right?”

“No! Because I got it in my head that I must be the child of *another* cat. Every day I was worried I would grow pads on my palms, or that my nails would become retractable, or that my irises would change shape. Even now, I’ve never tensed up as badly as when I stared at my reflection in the mirror after my irises constricted from exposure to bright light.”

“But now all doubt’s been cleared, I imagine.”

“Yes.” Lafier nodded. “Though I’ll never forget those restless days. Part of the reason I want to become a **starpilot** is to get out from under my father.”

“You don’t like your father?” Jinto didn’t know whether Abh standards of etiquette could condone prying into the life of a stranger this thoroughly, but despite his trepidation, he just had to ask.

“I don’t dislike him.” Her otherwise pretty face wrinkled up in a grimace. “I don’t want to admit it, but I love him, and I’m proud of him. It’s just that when I’m near him, I sometimes get irritated.”

The image of the face of his own father, the Count of Hyde, came to mind. A face he hadn't seen except through occasional correspondence for seven years. The feeling that he'd been betrayed by him, those seven years prior, festered inside him.

He couldn't really lie to himself that he *loved* him. But he didn't hate him, either. He felt nothing at all for him.

That, or that deep, deep recess of his heart was refusing to embrace the emotion.

"I guess every family's got its share of circumstances," Jinto remarked. "So, you kept saying your father *wouldn't* tell you, but did you finally get him to at some point?"

"Yes." She turned around, and with a beaming smile, said: "She's someone I know well — a woman I look up to. I was a **daughter of love.**"

"Good," Jinto said. And he meant it with all his heart.

Chapter 4: Patrol Ship Goslauth “Jinto, have yourself a look below,” Lafier said suddenly.

After a few seconds of microgravity and attitude control, a long stretch of time passed.

Jinto’s talk of minchiu — which, much to his chagrin, did not seem to be of much interest to Lafier — was cut short, and he shifted atop his bunk-seat to gaze down at the floor.

Amidst the unblinking stars, a structure was floating. It had the contours of a squashed hexagon, with a number of circular mouths open wide. Because it was slightly tilted, he could tell it was something like a tower, and one that he was either viewing from its base or its apex.

“Is that the **patrol ship** Goslauth?” asked Jinto.

“Correct. It’s somewhat bigger than this **vessel**, wouldn’t you agree?” said Lafier sarcastically.

“Somewhat,” said Jinto, though in truth it he couldn’t really grasp its size. He was certain it had to be incredibly enormous, but his mind perceived it as being smaller than the vessel they were on.

That was when it started suddenly zooming up in size. They stopped decelerating, and the ship’s interior reverted to microgravity. At the same time, their bunks reverted back to normal seats.

They’d finally crossed paths with the patrol ship again. Its relative speed was very low. The gargantuan tower slowly, slowly rose up towards them.

Jinto’s line of sight darted from the floor to the walls, then up to the ceiling. The part of the tower he’d been looking down moments ago was now scraping the stars far above him, and Jinto was beset by the false feeling that he’d plunged that whole distance down.

A prolonged nose dive. Was this the vantage a suicidal feather that had jumped off a cliff would see in its final moments?

The tower just wouldn't end.

"Wow, it really is astounding." Jinto sighed with admiration. When he reflected on the fact that it had been built for battle, its aura became all the more imposing and overwhelming. The hull before their eyes keenly asserted that it was a weapon constructed to wreak havoc. The only functioning weapons of any kind Jinto had seen up until that point were the *ribrasiac* (REEBRAHSEEA, paralyzer guns) that Delktunian police officers had strapped to their hips. It would have been stupid beyond compare to draw any comparisons between the two. It was in a whole different league.

"You're a little slow on the uptake," teased Lafier.

"C'mon, I couldn't tell from so far away. We're in *space*. You people've got it made with your *frocragh*." Jinto saw the face Lafier was pulling, and chuckled. "Please, you don't need to give me that sympathetic look. I've never minded the fact that I lack *frocragh*, and I have every intention of living right and thriving from here on out as well."

"Of course." Lafier looked away, flustered. "Allow me to give you the special opportunity to appreciate it."

"Thank you."

At last, the **imperial crest** passed by. Its design was the same as her rank insignia, but its hemming and the *gaftnochec* eight-headed dragon were gold, with a black base. And of course, the two insignias' sizes were incomparable. The national crest on the patrol ship was likely big enough to host a game of *minchiu*.

Finally, the warship's bow came into view.

With a wriggling of the fingers on Lafier's left hand, their vessel slipped sideways. The tip of the giant warship swooped blurrily over Jinto's head like a pendulum, and appeared on the opposite side.

The patrol ship came dropping down. It was a scene one would expect to be accompanied by a roaring noise.

"The Goslauth is leading-edge among the Empire's warships," explained Lafier. "It's 12.82 *üésdagh* long."

“That’s all?” It was surprisingly small.

“It’s small compared to an *alaicec* (AHLEK, battle-line warship). The ship you were on was almost certainly bigger than this one. However, there is probably no other warship with as much combat strength anywhere in the human-peopled cosmos, let alone the **Empire**.”

“I don’t doubt it.” He unreservedly believed it.

The vessel shifted angles and revolved around the patrol ship a number of times. “That should be enough, I think,” said Lafier.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

When Lafier moved the fingers on her left hand, a cutout video frame of a male starpilot floated up amidst the starry heavens.

“This is **Vessel 1. Ship Command number-code** is 01-00-0937684. *Slomhoth* (SLOHMFOTH, mission) **number-code** is 0522-01. Requesting admission.”

“Roger,” replied the starpilot. “External controls are ready. And let’s enjoy our little breaks in *moderation*, **Ship Command**. Unless you spotted something of note on the ship’s exterior?”

“Lonh-*ärlucec Dreur* had me show him the difference between this vessel and the main ship,” she replied, while giving Jinto a meaningful glance.

“What do you mean? Actually, never mind, just get on with your *longhoth rirragr* (LONZHOOTH REERAH, information link).”

“Roger.” Lafier motioned her fingers and told Jinto, “To tell the truth, I have no desire to rely on **computing crystals**, but it’s a military regulation, so I can’t disobey.”

*The **Star Forces** aren’t stupid enough to give an **apprentice** the chance to damage the ship.* But before Jinto could say as much, the patrol ship **starpilot** interrupted.

“Link confirmed.”

“Link confirmed on this end as well. Requesting end of transmission.”

“Ending transmission.” The image of the starpilot vanished from the screen,

to be replaced by a cavorting throng of numbers, glyphs and graphs.

“This leaves me with nothing else to do,” said Lafier, a little frustrated.

Jinto made sure his gratitude was known: “Thank you.”

“It’s just my mission.”

“So, what is your mission, exactly...?” asked Jinto. “What do you do when you don’t need to man the **vessel**? Do you have a lot of free time to fill?”

“What are you saying?” Lafier pouted. “An **apprentice**’s job is to learn through observation.”

“I mean, I know that, but...”

“They make me do anything and everything the **starpilots** of the *Gariac* (GAHREEA, Flight Department) do. Provided it’s suited to an apprentice, obviously. All in all, I am kept quite busy.”

“Okay.”

“You’ll see how tough it can be if you become an **apprentice**.”

“But I’ll be in the *Sazoïc* (SAHZOEE, Quartermasters’ Department), so...”

“I’ve heard that the **Quartermasters’ Department** gets busy, too. They spend all day inspecting food and supplies, among other things.”

“What a magnificent vocation,” Jinto groaned.

The patrol ship’s outer wall drew nearer and nearer before their eyes. A gaping wide hole had formed on its side.

Though the gravity was finely adjusted through attitude control, he felt out of sorts.

The hole had arrived right behind them — or so it might have registered to him had he been given time to think before the entire **steerer’s room** shifted 90 degrees, after which the hole appeared to lie right below them. Their vessel, pulled by the patrol ship’s artificial gravity, sank gently down.

At the last moment, the lower attitude-control jet nozzle spouted, softly landing the hull onto the *goriabh* (GORYAHV, takeoff deck). The ceiling **lock gate** of the *horh* (HORR, ship’s hatch) closed, and the lights turned on.

“Commencing pressurization,” announced the **starpilot** from earlier, who appeared on screen once again.

“Standing by while pressurization is in progress,” Lafier replied.

The vessel proceeded to get sprayed from all directions by plumes of white mist. These plumes collided and formed a complex whirl. Finally, it evened out into an undifferentiated haze, and steadily cleared away.

“Pressurization complete. Remain there and continue to stand by momentarily,” directed the starpilot.

“Roger that.”

“Wait, how come we need to stand by?” Jinto scanned Lafier’s expression to see if something was wrong. “Do they always have you wait a while?”

“No, today is different.”

“Then why...?”

“They need to prepare for your *Patmesaihoth* (PAHTMSAH’EEHOOTH, gangway welcome ceremony),” said Lafier as she removed her control glove and disconnected her **circlet’s access-cable**.

“*Patmesaihoth*?” That word rang a bell. If he recalled correctly, it referred to a ceremony held to welcome important people onto a ship. “Whose ceremony is it?”

“If you’re really asking because you don’t know, then you have the astuteness of a cyanobacterium,” said Lafier.

“Haha, sorry.” Of course it was *his* ceremony. There’s no way he’d be that dense. It’s just that he didn’t think he was all that “important” a person. “Isn’t that ceremony for people of the *Cheüass* (SHOOWAHSS, Kilo-commander) rank and up, though?”

“It’s a ceremony for people of your *tlaïgac* (TLAEEGA, title), *Lonh*. You are a *Lonh*, after all.”

“Now that you mention, I guess I am. But are they really willing to go through all that trouble just for little old me?”

“You are a ‘**grandee**,’ Jinto. You’re not so low in the **imperial** hierarchy.”

The Abh numbered about 25 million in total population. Most were **gentry**, with only about 200,000 **nobles**. Those that possessed populated planets as territory were called **grandees**. There were only 1,600 grandee families, and less than 20,000 individuals inclusive of family members.

By comparison, there were about 1 billion **imperial citizens**, and approximately 900 billion **territorial citizens** under Abh rule on **terrestrial worlds**. With those numbers in mind, one could definitely appreciate how uncommon **grandees** truly were.

It was true — the Household of the Count of Hyde belonged to a rare breed indeed —its not-so-favorable origin story notwithstanding.

“I’ve never been good with ceremonies and functions and stuff...”

“It won’t be that big a deal. Not enough to be called a ‘function,’ anyway,” Lafier assured him. “The ship’s captain will do a self-introduction, and then introduce you to the ship’s highest-ranked **starpilots**. That’s all.”

“That may be a ‘that’s all’ to you, but not so much to me...”

A door opened to their back left. An *onuhociac* (ONOOHOHKEEA, automaton) laid down a red carpet, and six starpilots ambled down it.

The starpilot at the head of the entourage, a lady with dark bluish-grey shoulder-length hair and bob-cut bangs, wore an *almfac clabrar* (AHLFA CLAHBRAR, one-winged circlet). The wing extended out to pin her hair so as not to interfere with the equipping of her *saputec* (SAHPOOT, pressurization helmet), and it also served to display her *sarérragh* (SAHRRERAHZH, designation as captain). In addition, she also bore the **ornamental belt-sash** that was proof she was serving in that role, and wielded the *greuc* (GRYOO, staff of command).

“Preparations for the *Patmesaiïhoth* Ceremony are complete,” sounded the voice transmission. “Bring Lonh-*ïarlucec Dreur Haïder* aboard.”

“Roger,” said Lafier, and she looked at Jinto encouragingly.

“Okay, I get it.” Jinto released his **seatbelt** and stood up. “You’re coming with me, right?”

Lafier shook her head in amazement. “To do what?”

“Oh,” Jinto said disappointedly. “Well, I, uh, hope I see you again later.”

“The living quarters aren’t so spacious. We will likely be meeting again.” That wasn’t exactly the response Jinto had been hoping to hear, but he had no choice but to be satisfied with it.

“All right, see you. And thank you for taking me here.”

“I enjoyed myself.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

Amidst the six **starpilots** attending the *Patmesaihoth*, the four lined up from Jinto’s right each had on the scarlet insignia of a **steerer**. At the leftmost position of those four stood the **captain**, and to her left there was the green insignia of the *scæmh* (SKEF, Engineers’ Department). At the very left, there was the white insignia of the **Quartermasters’ Department**.

What am I supposed to do during times like these? Jinto regretted not asking Lafier beforehand. Unfortunately, there were no lectures on how a **grandee** should handle a *Patmesaihoth* at the Abh Linguistic and Cultural Academy on Delktu.

For the time being, he straightened up his back and attempted a dignified posture.

An **NCC** (non-commissioned Lander crewmember), standing alone, blew a *méc* (MEH, whistle). The six starpilots saluted in unison.

Suppressing his right hand’s reflexive impulse to return the salute, he instead kept with the general etiquette of the Abh (however awkwardly) and aligned his heels, straightened his back, and lowered his head.

“We are honored by your presence, *Lonh*,” said the captain. The color of her irises brimmed like melted gold, in contrast with her black pupils. “I am **Captain** of the **patrol ship** Goslauth, *Bomoüass* (BOHMOHWAHS, Hecto-commander) Lexshue (LEKSHOO).”

Huh, I guess Abhs introduce themselves by name when meeting new people, too. How... normal.

Jinto lowered his head again. “My name is *Linn ssynec-Rocr İarlucec Dreur Haider Ghintec*. I thank you, and I hope I can be of service on the way to the **Capital, Captain.**” Jinto was pleased he’d proved able to say something passable. He was especially happy he hadn’t butchered his own name.

“Please leave it to us. Might I also introduce my subordinates, if you wouldn’t mind?” The Hecto-commander presented her five subordinates to him.

Lexshue resembled Lafier, but only in some way he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He’d thought that due to their uniform level of beauty, their features would by that same token lack individuality, but that was not the case. The other **starpilots** were beautiful in their own ways, with distinctive facial features.

First was the *bynecairh* (BYOONKEHRR, supervisor) and *Loüass Scæmr* (LOHWAHSS SKEM, Engineering Deca-commander), whose name was Gymryac (GYOOMRYOOA). These were the titles of the crew member in charge of maintaining and inspecting the warship’s equipment, starting with its *opsaic* (OHPSEH, main engine system). In contrast with her ebony skin, her eyes and hair were a bright azure.

Next was the *üigtec* (WEEG, clerk). If the **supervisor** was in charge of minding the machines, he was in charge of minding all the people on board. His name was Dich (DEESH), and he was *Loüass Sazoïr* (Quartermaster Deca-commander). His reddish eyes gleamed with a quiet serenity.

The *Ruse* (ROOSEH, Vice-Captain) cum *almrilbigac* (AHLMREELBEEGA, senior navigator) was **Deca-commander** Rairia. He was a man with a light blue moustache, and a chiseled visage. His smile lent him a friendly and approachable image.

The *almtlaci* (AHLM’TLAHKEEA, senior gunner) was Sarrych (SAHRYOOSH), who was also a *raicléc* (REKLEH, vanguard starpilot). His surname indicated he was a member of a family with a distinguished history even among the Abh, and his eyes were as sharp as a razor.

Lastly, there was the *almdroci* (AHLMDROHKEEA, senior communications officer). Her name was Ynséryac (YOONSERYOOA, and she too was a **vanguard starpilot**. Her hair could only be described as the type of blue one imagines

when thinking of it as a primary color, and as for her demeanor, she exuded a calm composure.

They were all Abh, and they looked like they were in their mid-20s. There was no way to tell their actual ages.

“We will depart at once,” said Lexshue once the time for introductions concluded. “Once again, we would be honored if you could accompany us to the *gahorh* (GAH’HORR, ship’s bridge), if you would be amenable?”

“Of course, my pleasure,” answered Jinto. He glimpsed at the vessel behind him. Lafier still hadn’t exited it.

“Your luggage will be brought to your room by **NCCs**,” said Lexshue, apparently misconstruing why Jinto had looked back.

“Ah, right... thank you.”

“Now please, it’s this way.” Lexshue pointed the way.

If this had been Delktu, Lexshue would have been appraised as a peerless beauty. While her golden eyes were peculiar, they did nothing to harm her charms. In fact, they only accentuated them.

It wasn’t that Jinto wasn’t used to girls — he’d learned how to conduct himself around people of the female persuasion on Delktu. Now, beautiful *older* ladies... Those were harder to deal with. The fact that the beautiful lady in question was also the commander of a warship only made her even more arresting.

His place walking beside the **Captain** had been wordlessly prepared for him, and he kept pace shoulder-to-shoulder with her, but he felt really uncomfortable. That was only exacerbated by the five high-ranked **starpilots** following in their wake like a gaggle of squires. The “*daimon*” **standard gravity level** of the Abh was around half the intensity of what Jinto was used to — and yet, his gait was prone to becoming sluggish.

The bridge was semicircular. Taking into account how the upper portion of the walls was slightly curved, he thought the interior could well be spherical in shape. The floor was two-tiered, while the outer part was one tier lower.

“Lonh-*ïarlucec Dreur Haïder* and **Captain!**” reported the *sach laitfaicr* (SAHSH LETFEK, escort NCC) assigned to the bridge. Jinto followed the captain onto the tall-centered semicircle.

Nine starpilots stood at attention and gave Jinto a welcoming salute.

“Please, over here.” **Hecto-commander** Lexshue invited him to take a seat that had been, by all appearances, provided for him on a temporary basis.

“Thank you very much.” Jinto nodded and seated himself.

When the captain took a seat, the other starpilots followed suit. The four high-ranked starpilots also entered the bridge and settled into their posts. Twelve of the officers headed toward the *cloüc* (KLOH’OO, console) so as to encircle their captain. The other two, **Supervisor** Gymryac and **Clerk** Dich, turned their backs to the captain and took seats at the front.

“Show video of the outside.” In accordance with Lexshue’s command, the walls morphed into the star-speckled reaches of space.

Since the **starpilots**, including the **captain**, had the **access-cables** of their **circlets** connected, that gesture must have been done out of consideration for Jinto and his lack of *frocragh* spatio-sensory perception.

“Prepare for departure.” The **Hecto-commander**’s voice cracked through the air like a whip.

Jinto couldn’t muster the desire to scrutinize the way they worked with affected detachment; he huddled up in his chair. He felt like some mischievous little scamp who’d barged into the wrong place.

“All engines in order,” reported **Engineering Deca-commander** Gymryac.

“Interior environment in order,” said **Quartermaster Deca-commander** Dich.

“Preparations complete for steering.” **Vanguard Starpilot** Sarrych equipped the **control glove**.

“Permission received from the **Flight Control** of the **Vorlash Countdom** to cross the *saudec* (SOHD, gate).”

“The permitted time is 15:27:12 by ship’s time,” reported Vanguard Starpilot Ynséryac.

“Ready for departure.” **Executive Officer** Reiria reported the final announcement.

“Very good.” The captain nodded. “Accelerate at *daimon*-force 6, toward the *Saudec Bhoracec* (SOHD VORLAHK, Vorlash Gate).”

Vanguard Sarrych heard her orders. “Veering toward 17-62-55.”

“Authorized,” Lexshue replied.

Thanks to the artificial gravity on board, he couldn’t feel any tremors induced by attitude control. However, the broad swaying of the stars was ample proof that the giant warship had moved its muzzle. Jinto craned his neck from the back of his chair, and was met with the sight of Delktu as a tiny speck.

“Attitude control complete.”

“*Daïsairé* (DAEESHEHREH, setting sail)!”

The **patrol ship** vibrated lightly at her word. Water flooded into the *flisésïac* (FLEESESEEA, matter-antimatter-annihilation engine). A stream of antiprotons shot into the water; where the matter and antimatter collided, they voraciously devoured one another, unbinding energy in their wake. All the matter that failed to collide with antimatter absorbed the energy, leapt into empty space, and kicked the enormous ship into motion from the recoil. That was what caused the vibrations.

“Is all this travel wearisome?” Lexshue asked him, concern in her voice.

“Absolutely not,” responded Jinto, quite truthfully. “It’s my first time experiencing this, so I find it fascinating.”

“Do you have any questions for us?”

“Yes.” After some thought, Jinto had come up with a question he deemed safe to ask. “From the introductions earlier, I thought that **Vanguard** Sarrych was the **senior gunner**, but now I understand he’s also in charge of steering. Do all **gunners** also steer?”

“Correct. Steering while in *dadh* (DAHDTH, normal space) is a **gunner**’s job. That’s because for **patrol ships**, steering and battle maneuvers are closely intertwined.”

“I see. I, uh, have another question, if it’s all right...”

“What is it?”

“I was under the impression that **clerks** do clerical office work. I’ve noticed they have duties on the **bridge** as well, though.”

“Well observed. They are responsible for checking on whether the gravity control is regular, or whether the interior pressurization is holding. However, they are usually only on the **bridge** during takeoff and landing, or during battle. Otherwise they’re typically in the secretarial rooms, performing their operational tasks.”

“What do those ‘operational tasks’ they carry out in the secretarial rooms entail?”

“Ahh, you must be all the more interested in that department given that’s where your future will be, *Lonh*. I’m certain you would learn more asking Dich directly, but...” While he was (somewhat awkwardly) maintaining a conversation with Lexshue, he discovered that the **starpilot** was, in fact, a kind-hearted woman.

There was, however, a barrier. The **captain** never broke away from her pointedly courteous comportment, and Jinto, for his part, lacked the courage to dispense with it and slip into more vulgar speech.

Hecto-commander Lexshue was earnest by nature, and she tried to answer Jinto’s queries as much as she could. Though he felt like he was being treated like a child from time to time, that didn’t bother him. Jinto knew he still had so much to learn about Abh culture.

At last, **Deca-commander** Reiria’s report came in. “Three minutes until **gate** transit.”

“I apologize for interrupting our conversation,” said the captain. “Activate the flasath (FLAHSATH, space-time bubble),” she ordered.

“*Flasatiac* (FLAHSATTEEA, space-time bubble engine) in order,” said **Engineering Deca-commander** Gymryac.

“*Flasath* activation confirmed.” The footage in front of them showed a

multitude of **Vorlash gates**. This was the second configuration of yuanons.

The Abh called the first form of yuanons — like the ones packed in the propulsion engine of the Leif Erikson—“*saudec læza*” (SOHD LEHZA, closed gate). The second shape yuanons could take, the phosphorescent, spherical pockets of space a mere *sedagh* in diameter each, was called “*saudec graca*” (SOHD GRAHKA, open gate), or simply *saudec*.

“One minute until **gate** transit.”

“Start counting down by the second at E-minus thirty,” ordered the **Captain**.

“Roger.”

By the time the countdown commenced, the stars ahead became shrouded in the gentle light of the **gates**.

“.....five, four, three, two, one, traversing.”

Passing through the **gate** did not cause any turbulence on impact, but the video of the outside changed completely. Gone was the phosphorescent light. So too did the stars and heavens vanish. A vast ashen sky was all the eye could see.

The secret of faster-than-light travel lay in so-called *fadh* (FAHDTH, flat space), which was governed by different physical laws than *dadh* or “normal” space. As the name might suggest, it was a cosmic fabric made up of two-dimensional space and one-dimensional time. The interstellar spaceships of the Abh wrapped themselves in **space-time bubbles** to cross this abnormal space. Time-space bubbles were shreds of normal space; just as compacted sixth-dimensional continuous bodies exist within fourth-dimensional space-time, they were permitted to exist within “flat space.”

The patrol ship Goslauth was now in a space apart from space. If an observer within this space were to look at the patrol ship, all they would be able to “see” would be a meager little floating atom.

In that moment, Jinto knew that no matter what kind of calamity the “normal space” of *dadh* was hit with, he would have no way of knowing — and that made him shudder.

“Confirm position,” the **Captain** commanded, and Jinto turned around. “Are you aware that we do not know our current position?”

“What do you mean?”

“When shifting from dadh to fadh,” began **Hecto-commander** Lexshue, explaining the basics of *sotfairh fadhotr* (SOHTFEHRR FAHDTHOHT, theory of flat space navigation), “and vice versa, we can only know our position probabilistically. You have heard the term ‘probabilistic’ before, I trust?”

“It’s the fancy word for ‘hit-or-miss,’” he said with evident pride.

“That’s not too far off,” the captain nodded. “The interior of the **gate** corresponds to flat space, and the exterior to normal space. But we aren’t sure of our exact location. Gates often draw imperfect helical curves upon flat space, but we’re not privy onto which part of those curves we will appear.”

“Confirmation of position complete,” reported the **senior navigator**.

“Right bank, 117-92 from the terminal edge.”

Two-dimensional video showed up on the floor. The interior of the **gate**, shaped like a distorted helix, contained a point of shining blue light. That was the present position of the patrol ship Goslauth.

“Assume complete *noctamh* (NOHKTAHF, mobile-state) at 280 degrees.” After the captain issued her orders, she asked Jinto, “Do you know of mobile-state and *scobrtamh* (SKORTAHF, stationary-state)?”

“Yes. That much I do know,” said Jinto. He may have been headed to the **Quartermasters’ Department**, but one needed to know at least that much to earn academy admittance. Although when it came to the nitty-gritty mathematics of these things, he could but throw up his arms in surrender.

If there were an observer in **flat space**, they would see the **space-time** bubble as a particle — an elementary particle that gradually shed its mass. This elementary particle could take two states. They were *noctamh* and *scobrtamh*.

An easy way to grasp the concept would be to imagine a sphere rotating on the floor. If the axis of rotation is made vertical to the floor, then that sphere will remain at that spot. With a horizontal axis of rotation, the sphere rolls

across the floor. The vertical-axis example is to *scobrtamh* or the stationary-state, as the horizontal-axis example is to *noctamh* or the mobile-state. (There is no equivalent state for a diagonal axis of rotation.) When in the **mobile-state**, the direction of the rotational axis can be freely determined. Moreover, the two states can be switched between instantaneously, thereby allowing one to adjust the velocity as well.

What one mustn't forget is that whether staying in one place or rolling, it is always itself rotating. In other words, it expends a fixed amount of energy over time.

"Navigating from here onwards is the **navigator's** job," Lexshue murmured, pointing to Reiria. "Our destination is *Saudec Sfagnaumr* (SOHD SFAHGNOHM, Sfagnoff Gate).

Chart a course."

A blue, dotted line crossing near the distorted helix appeared near-instantly. Reiria looked up at the **captain** and said, "Course calculations complete."

"Acknowledged." **Hecto-commander** Lexshue nodded, and said "I leave the rest to you, Reiria. Place us on course."

"Roger, **Captain**. Leave it to me."

The blip of light indicating their current position tried to crawl out from the helix's interior to the newly accessible area. A green blip of light appeared on the borderline of the helix and began to move. Another green blip passed the blue one by, headed toward the helix. It was a ship headed toward the **Countdom of Vorlash**. In that time, the blue blip reached the dotted line and started tracing it.

"We've converged on the course, **Captain**," said Reiria.

"Very good. All hands relieved of preparation duties. Shift to primary response stance," said the **Hecto-commander** as she stowed away her accessible.

The **starpilots** on the bridge stood up. Only three remained seated. The starpilots saluted her before exiting the room, and **Hecto-commander** Lexshue stood up to salute them back.

Jinto, unsure of how he should behave in the meantime, just fidgeted in his seat.

“*Lonh.*” The captain had once again taken a seat. “Despite this being your first experience of such space travel, I believe you will find it quite dull from this point on. The **starpilots** on duty will remain gloomy and silent, absorbed in the task of scanning the equipment for possible malfunctions. Please allow me to show you to your room.”

But Jinto had made up his mind. “No, **Captain**, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to continue our conversation.”

“It would be my pleasure, *Lonh.* I myself find times like these tedious. But what is it you would like to discuss?”

“Do you know of the origins of the **Countdom of Hyde**?”

“I do. Its conquest was the topic of much talk, after all.” From how she spoke, one might assume the words “conquest” or “invasion” had no negative connotations associated with them. Maybe they just didn’t sound distasteful to her when it was Abhs at the helm of those conquests.

“Then I’m sure you’re already aware, but I really don’t know how to act like a **noble.**”

“Is that true?” she said, apparently surprised.

“That’s right. I’m lost, honestly. I never learned that kind of stuff.”

“You mean you didn’t associate with the family of the **Count of Vorlash**?”

“I didn’t, no.” The Count of Vorlash had shown no interest whatsoever in the heir to the Count of Hyde residing in his territory. Nor had Jinto ever harbored any desire to pay the *garich* (GAHREESH, orbital estate) a visit. “They never extended an invitation.”

“So you’re trying to say that you don’t know how best to interact with us?”

“Yes, that’s right,” nodded Jinto. “To strike up a conversation this heavy with a nice lady I just met... tell me if it’s too much trouble...”

“It’s no trouble,” said Lexshue gleefully. “It’s not often at all that **gentry** gets to dictate the behavior of a **grandee!**”

“So is my, uh, attitude all wrong? Is a **grandee** supposed to you know, act *big* or something?”

“You could certainly get away with it,” said the **Hecto-commander**. “At the cost of being disliked. Is that all?”

“I’m glad. That means I’m not acting that strange.”

“No.” Lexshue crossed her arms. “Though to tell you the truth, you do come across a tad *eccentric*. Eccentricity is not always necessarily deserving of criticism, of course.”

“Haha...” Jinto could feel all his self-confidence suddenly dissipate. “Umm, what exactly is a **grandee** who’s not ‘eccentric’ like?”

“They do have something of an air of *dignity* about them.”

“I knew it,” said Jinto, deflated.

“How you are, though, is much preferable to nobles who go overboard with the overweening pride, *Lonh*.”

“Thank you very much.” But not even the **Captain**’s consoling words could heal Jinto’s heart.

“You do realize that your standing in society is higher than mine, yes?”

“Actually, that’s something I’m a little fuzzy on, too. You’ve been very polite to me this whole time, **Captain**, but I really don’t feel worthy of that courtesy.”

“Is that so?” The captain seemed perplexed. It was the puzzlement of someone who didn’t quite know how to interact with a person this extremely clueless.

“I mean, I understand the hierarchy of the different **noble ranks**. What’s never made much sense to me, no matter how much I looked into it, is how those noble ranks relate with their social status. In fact, the more I researched, the harder it became to understand. It’s often the case all across the **Empire** that **nobles** work under **gentry**, for one.”

“Yes, that’s very much a matter of course.”

“Which would mean that I don’t have any social status. Am I wrong?”

“As far as the relationships between people who belong to different organizations go, it’s the *darmsath bhoflir* (DARMSAHTH VOHFLEER, imperial hierarchy) that means everything,” Lexshue explained. “I am a **captain**, and thanks to that, I have been conferred the peerage of *raloch* (RAHLOHSH, knight first-class). It’s a fairly high social standing for **gentry**, but it’s nowhere near yours, *iarlucec Dreur*.”

“Doesn’t that get confusing?”

“What would be confusing?”

“If someone’s social standing is higher than their superior officer’s, doesn’t it get difficult to give them orders?”

The **Hecto-commander** laughed a light little laugh. “This is when it’s between people who belong to different organizations, remember? Within the military itself, this is all that matters.” She pointed to the insignia on her upper right arm — exactly like Lafier had. It might well have been a gesture shared by all **starpilots** of the **Star Forces**. “If you are assigned to a **starpilot quartermaster** post under us, *Lonh*, rest assured that we will work you to the ground. You are kindly advised not to expect this kind of cordial treatment when that happens.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard...” But Jinto still wasn’t fully convinced. “What if you can’t stop thinking about my standing outside of the military, though?”

“Hmmm...” Lexshue spoke even as she considered the question. “In the past, that may have been a problem. However, our class system and military have become more and more *refined* over time. These days, that sort of thing just doesn’t come up. People who can’t make a clear distinction between their time in the **Star Forces** and their time in civilian society will be considered disqualified to participate in polite society no matter their rank.”

“Sounds complex,” sighed Jinto.

“Does it? I’ve been living in this society since I was born, so to me it just seems in the nature of things.”

“Maybe it’s something like seniority by age...?”

“What do you mean?”

“Ahh.” Jinto launched into an explanation.

While not so much on Martinh, on Delktu, the ideal of honoring one’s elders was very much emphasized. The older an elder got, the more they were respected. That being said, even on Delktu it wasn’t too uncommon for some to have a younger boss. Within a given organization, it wasn’t age that was respected, but rather rank. But when two people were extracted from within that organization, that relationship could flip right around. It appeared that amongst the Abh, who didn’t have readily apparent age differences, perhaps the concept of “seniority by age” was a confounding one.

“Maybe it is similar,” said Lexshue in tentative agreement. “We aren’t very conscious of people’s ages at all.”

“Wait, hold on...” Jinto’s opinions suddenly came spilling out. “Elder people usually have a wealth of life experience, so it makes sense to honor their wisdom. But how does being born to a higher-ranked household make someone an inherently worthier person?”

He was very aware that he was essentially criticizing a matter at the core of the whole **Empire**, but he felt totally at ease. He was himself a **noble**, after all. There was no need to hold back when it was his own standing he was doubting the worth of. Even so, he was expecting the **captain** would be shaken by his question.

Yet Lexshue’s expression didn’t change at all. It seemed an utterly impossible undertaking to stab at the heart of an Abh.

“Hmm, yes...” The captain pondered. “A **noble** is the progeny of an outstanding figure. An inheritor of the **family traditions** that that outstanding figure built up. As such, we tend to expect they will also excel in some way or another. I think that’s why there’s value in paying them our respect.”

“Really?” Jinto was skeptical. “But just because someone is raised by a person of high-caliber doesn’t mean they’ll excel—”

“Not always, no,” Lexshue granted the point without issue. “You are quite right — just because someone achieves a great accomplishment doesn’t mean they’ll be an equally excellent educator. There are a number of examples of heroes’ children being useless disappointments. However, speaking in

generalities, the descendant of a person of high caliber will usually have some quality worthy of respect.”

“Huh.” Jinto nodded, but noncommittally. At the back of his mind, he was thinking about his own circumstances. Even if he granted, for the sake of argument, that his father was a “man of high caliber,” Jinto had not really been raised by him.

“Besides,” continued Lexshue, “One’s ‘elders’ are not necessarily worthy of respect, either.”

“That is true.” Jinto imagined someone who’d grown old without ever learning a thing.

“We have a solid basis for our social order, and it more than encompasses something as rudimentary as respect for elders. That is what I think, anyway. Was that helpful to you?”

“Yes. By all means.” It was certainly informative, that much was beyond dispute. He still had his misgivings, though, and didn’t swallow all of what he’d been told.

“Now then, let me guide you to your room. Calling the **apprentice** who escorted Lonh from the **spaceport**,” she said, holding her wrist computer to her face.

“Ah, her...” She was of course speaking of Lafier. “She’s a **noble**, too, right?”

Lexshue opened her eyes wide in surprise. “No.”

“Really? That’s odd. I mean, her bearing was really different from yours, **Captain.**”

“You mean to tell me you don’t know who she is!?” Her right eyebrow, as dark bluish-grey as the rest of her hair, rose accusingly.

“No. I, uhh...” He had a bad feeling about where this was going — bad enough to feel like the back of his brain was burning to a crisp. “Was it wrong of me to not know?”

“No — I think it’s probably understandable, given your *eccentric* upbringing.” The captain grinned, and turned on the audio receiver of her wrist computer.

“Apprentice Starpilot Abliar, report to the **bridge** immediately.”

“‘Abliar’!?” It was the same name as the *Glaharérh* (GLAHHARERR, Commander-in-Chief) of the **armada**. She was a member of a **royal family**, and her surname was that of the **Imperial Household**. “Which ‘Abliar’ family?”

“She’s a member of the *Lartiéc Crybr* (LARTEE’EH KRYOOB, royal family of Cryb).”

“Then that means...”

“Yes.” An impish smile graced her lovely countenance. **“Apprentice Starpilot** Abliar is the granddaughter of *Speunaigh Érumitta* (SPYEUNEZH EHRUMEETA, Her Majesty the Empress).”

Chapter 5: The *Lartnéc Frybarar* (LARTNEH FRYOOBARAR, Imperial Princess) The Empire put a certain amount of trust in the loyalty of the nobility and gentry, as well as in the family ties between Abhs. But not too much trust — they did not have any illusions.

It was incumbent upon the Empress, who stood at the nucleus of the Empire's consolidation of power, to understand that it was the Empire's military power that safeguarded that consolidation. That was the Empire's founding principle.

As such, the occupier of the *Scaimsorragh* (SKEMSORAHZH, the Emperorship) had to have military experience, and, if possible, was to be a superlative military leader.

On the other hand, automatically making anyone who had taken hold of military authority the Emperor would inevitably lead to dizzying internal strife and power struggles. It would lead quickly to the collapse of the **Empire**.

Cilugragh (KEELOOGRAHZH, succession of the throne) in the **Humankind Empire of Abh** was hereditary, but they adopted a system that took into account the innate qualities of each of a number of possible successors.

The **royalty** comprised eight separate **royal families**. They were all the descendants of the siblings and children of the *Scurlaiteriac* (SKOORLETEHREEA, Founding Emperor), Abliar Dunei, and they all shared the *fizz* (FEEZ, family name) "Abliar."

The families with that cognomen were:

Lartiéc-Scirh néic-Lamrar (SKEERR NAY-LAHMRAR) — the royal family of Scirh; *Lartiéc-Ilicr néic-Dusil* (EELEEK NAY-DOOSEEL) — the royal family of Ilich (EELEESH); *Lartiéc-Lasiser néic-Lamlyar* (LAHSEESEHR NAY-LAMLYAR) — the royal family of Lasisec (LAHSEES); *Lartiéc-Üescor néic-Duell* (WESKOR NAY-DOOEL) — the royal family of Üesco; *Lartiéc-Barcœr néic-Lamsar* (BARKEHR

NAY-LAHMSAR) — the royal family of Barce (BARKEH); *Lartiéc*-Balgzeder néic-Dubzel (BAHLGZEDEHR NEI DOOBZEL) — the royal family of Balgzédé; *Lartiéc*-Syrgzœdér néic-Duasecec (SYURGZEUDEHR NEI DOOASEK) — the royal family of Syrgœedéc; and *Lartiéc*-Crybr néic-Dublescec (KRYIB NEI-DOOBLESK) — the Cryb Kingdom.

These were the *ga-lartiéc* — the eight royal families.

Those born to these families bore the duty to take on *slymecoth* (SLYIMKOHTH, military service). They couldn't get by enlisting in departments with more behind-the-scenes work like the **Quartermasters'** or *Gairitec* (GAEEREET, Army Medical) Departments. They had to enlist as **starpilots** in the *Garér* (GAHREHR, Flight Department).

With regard with to **military service**, **imperials** had only one special right, and it had to do with their enrollment in the *Bhosecrac* (VOHSKRA, Military Academy). According to Star Forces regulations, it took at least four and a half years to advance to a military college, but an exception was made for imperials. They were automatically enrolled after two and a half years, without regard to their competence level.

Thus appointed as a *faictodaïc* (FEKTOHDAEE, linewing starpilot), they would then ascend to the rank of *rinhairh* (REENYEHRR, rearguard starpilot) in a year's time, after which they would become a **vanguard starpilot** in a year and a half. Following that, they would enroll in the most difficult to enter of the all the military academies, the Dunei **Star Forces Academy** (*Bhosecrac Duner*).

Upon completion of half a year's education, they took on the *rénh* (RENYUH, court rank) of **Deca-commander**, with the *ptorahedesomh* (PTORA'HEHDEHSHOF, commander's insignia) to go with it.

This was the “special right” of the **Imperial Household**, but looking at it from another angle, they were being asked to shoulder responsibilities beyond their experience and ability, and they had no automatic right to a rank above **Deca-commander**. The rate of promotion after reaching that level was more or less the same as other military academy graduates'. Moreover, if they failed in a mission, they had to face punishment or dismissal with no more mercy than **gentry** or **nobility** could expect.

They climbed their way through the ranks of the **Flight Department** as linewing **starpilots**, and once they finally reached the rank of *Rüé-spenec* (ROOEH-SPEHN, Imperial Admiral), they received special imperial appointment to the rank of *Glaharérr Rüé-byrer* (Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief). In peacetime, it was a title that didn't hold command over a single soldier apart from a handful of headquarters personnel, but it was once a prominent post that the Emperor customarily held onto, and succeeding to it meant becoming next in line for the throne, or the *Cilugiac* (KEEROOGEEA, Crown Prince[ss]) When the new **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief** was decided, it was standard practice for members of the **imperial family** either older than them or less than 20 years younger than them to ask to be transferred to reserve duty. Even before that point, many imperial family members who had given up on becoming Emperor proceeded to leave the military, and then either succeeded to a *lartragh* (LARTRAHZH, king/queenship) or else simply lived as an imperial with a noble rank for a single generation.

Each generation of imperial-family descendants possessed a *sapainec* (SAHPEHN, surname-title), "Baus (BOHS)," that indicated they had inherited the family traditions of the **Imperial Household**. Yet their social standing was that of a **noble**. When one became a noble, they could no longer retain the surname "Abliar."

The **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief** almost always ended up waiting for the appearance of a new **Imperial Admiral** as the next **imperial** in line to the throne. He or she acceded to the imperial throne when someone who could take over his or her own position emerged. At that juncture, the Emperor or Empress would suddenly abdicate.

For the long-lived Abh, it was not rare for a former Emperor to enjoy 100 more years after stepping down from the *scaimsorh* (SKEMSOHRR, throne). But the **Empire** did not allow them to rest on their laurels. Former Emperors were automatically appointed to the *Luzæc Fanigalacr* (LOOZEH FAHNEEGAHLAHK, Council of Abdicant Emperors), while *larth* (kings/queens) were chosen for it by mutual election, thereby receiving the honorary title of *nisoth* (NEESOTH, "Their Eminence").

It was this Council of Abdicant Emperors that was responsible for the

promotion and inquiry of **starpilots** that were **imperials**. It was said those hearings were tougher than the ones military organizations conducted for ordinary starpilots. The descendants of the **eight royal families** were forced to get past those hearings, as they were given 40 years to compete over the *scaimsorh rænr* (SKEMSOHRR REN, jade throne).

While he waited for the **Apprentice Starpilot** to appear, Jinto used his **compuwatch** to run a search of *rüé-lalasac* (ROOEHLAHLAHSAAH, imperials of distinguishment), and discovered that Ablïar Néïc-Dubreuscr, *Bærh Parhynr* (BEHRR PARRHYUHN, Viscountess of Parhynh) was the *lartnéc casna* (LARTNEH KAHSNAH, first princess).

Walking a step behind her, Jinto felt truly restless. The confusion that had dogged him for six years had reached a crescendo.

Previously, it had been more like an insect that buzzed annoyingly around him. Jinto had had ample chance to grow accustomed to it, and sometimes he even felt fine with it, *appreciated* it. However, it was as though he'd caught wind somewhere that the insect was furnished with a stinger, and boy had it begun to sting.

He had, of course, expected to bump into an **imperial** at some point. He himself was technically a **noble**, and he figured it was great that that qualified him to gain the favor of imperials. He'd assumed his first encounter with them would be at some social gathering like a ball or a dinner party. And he'd assumed they'd properly introduce themselves as such.

What had transpired instead was a veritable *sneak attack*.

His supposed conviction that all people are born equal was apparently shakier than he thought, given that it flew out the window the second he found himself near someone who was so close, by blood, to the ruler of an **Empire** that presided over 900 billion *bisarh* (BEESARR, subjects). His past and future aside, Jinto, at that moment, was an **Abh noble**, totally immersed in the Empire's class system.

When he recalled how the **Captain** had taken a polite attitude with him, the legitimate heir of an upstart **noble**, his fears that his behavior in the **docking vessel** had been glib only worsened.

How was he going to smooth things over? Jinto stared wildly around.

Contrary to Jinto's expectations, the **warship's** interior wasn't no-frills impersonal; there were paintings along the hallway walls of the **patrol ship**. Not only that, but they were full of windblown grassy fields, and skies of drifting white clouds. He thought they might have given him at least some peace of mind, but they had absolutely no effect.

"What's the matter, Jinto?" Lafier's face appeared beside the hovering fluff of painterly dandelions. "You haven't said a word. And why are you walking behind me?"

"Fiac Rüé-nér (FEEA ROOEH-NEHR, Your Highness the Imperial Princess), I..." Jinto began, with utmost deference.

Instantly, Lafier stopped in her tracks and turned around. The look she shot him gave him goosebumps.

She had shot him glares during their time on the docking vessel, too. However, now he could see they'd been half in jest, like a dog play-biting.

This is the face she pulls when she's really pissed...

Her face, beautifully constructed, was tinged with unmistakable anger, black fire blazing in her ebony eyes. But, belying that fire, the words that escaped her lips were as bitter-cold as the vacuum of space.

"I am not a *Rüé-nér*, an **imperial princess**. I am a Lartné princess. Daughter of a king, not of the Empress herself. The Empress is my grandmother. My father is a mere *larth* king.

"Forgive me, *Fiac Lartné*." He bowed his head with all cordiality, but on the inside Jinto stewed: *Did she really have to get so angry over something as silly as getting her title wrong?*

Lafier turned away in a huff and started stomping off from him. Jinto chased after her in a panic.

Lafier had more to say. "If you insist on fixating so much on my relation to Her Majesty, I am a *Rüé-baugenér* (ROOEH-BOHGNEHR, granddaughter of the Empress), but that's not an official title, and I seldom use it anyway. In fact, I

myself was shocked when I discovered that I was the granddaughter of an Empress. And most importantly, ‘*Fiac Rüé-baugenér*’ just sounds weird! ‘Granddaughter of the Empress’?”

“Sure, I can see tha — er, I mean, *certainly, Fiac*,” Jinto concurred diffidently.

“When I was born, I inherited the **fief** and **title** of **Viscountess of Parhynh** from **Her Majesty the Empress** through my father, who is my legal guardian. That’s why I’m sometimes called ‘*Fiac Bærh Parhynr*.’ Though here, for *whatever* reason, people usually refer to me as ‘**Apprentice Starpilot** Abliar,’” Lafier rattled on.

Unable to butt in, Jinto could only keep on walking in blank amazement.

“I thought I told you — you will call me ‘Lafier’!”

Jinto could be bone-headed at times, but even he now grasped the real reason Lafier was so upset. He changed his tone on a dime. “Okay, got it, my bad. You’re ‘Lafier’ to your friends, then.”

“Not even to my friends.” Lafier’s tone was as curt as ever. “The only ones who address me without my **title** are my father, Larth Crybr *Fiac* Dubeusec, my grandmother, **Her Majesty the Empress**, my aunt, Countess Gemfaz *Fiac* Lamryunar of the Countdom of Lamryun. Them, and the *fanigac* (FAHNEEGAH, retired emperors) that I’m directly descended from. That’s about it. My friends call me either *Fiac Lartnér* or just *Fiac*, while my relatives all seem to have taken to calling me *Fiac* Lafier.”

“Then why...?” He spontaneously froze in his steps. He, a mere heir to a countdom, had, unbeknownst to him, obtained an incredible privilege. And here he’d been, actively trying to discard it. “You want me to call you ‘Lafier’... even though we’ve only barely met?”

“It was the first time anyone ever asked me my name.” Lafiel also stopped walking, but she kept facing ahead.

“Being the granddaughter of the **Empress** means everyone already knows my name and appearance. I’m famous, apparently. People call me ‘*Fiac Lartnér*’ without my ever getting to introduce myself. So even people I’m quite close to end up calling me *Fiac*. It’s been like that all my life. I didn’t pay it all that much

mind, but at the academy, I felt the tiniest — the tiniest — bit jealous when everyone was dropping titles when calling each other's names. That jealousy only grew worse when I realized that my peers were always unable to 'loosen up' when I was around."

"I, I'm sorry..." Jinto was appalled at the enormity of the offense he'd committed. He'd inadvertently slapped away the hand she'd extended in good will, and dealt a blow to her heart.

"Do not apologize." As coldly as ever, she stated "You have done nothing wrong. While '*Fiac Rüé-nér*' is definitely mistaken, you meant nothing by it. I wasn't brought up to endure rude monikers, but I will accept any *proper* name. So be at ease, *Lonh-ïarlucec Dreur* — you may now call me '*Fiac Lartnér*' or '*Fiac Bærh Parhynr*.'"

"No, it's okay, I'll just call you 'Lafier'..."

"Don't get the wrong idea. It's not as though I really wanted you to call me 'Lafier.'"

I just thought it would be questionable to introduce myself with my **title** attached."

*Maybe she isn't suited to becoming **Empress**; she's a terrible liar.*

Jinto shook off that thought and pled anew. "Please, I'd really like to just call you 'Lafier.'"

Lafier finally turned back to face him, and stared intently.

"Don't strain yourself, *Lonh*."

"I'm not. I swear..."

"Then I don't even mind if you call me '*Fiac Rüé-baugenér*.'" Jinto let out a gasp. He'd wounded her so much that she'd rather he called her the name she'd said sounded "weird."

"What do I need to do to make it up to you!?"

Lafier just kept wordlessly staring at Jinto for a while. Then, at last, her cheeks twitched. The indignant **princess** started chuckling, as though she couldn't hold it in any longer.

Jinto was relieved — it seemed their friendship had been mended.

“You really had no idea I was an Abliar?” asked Lafier, after stifling the urge to laugh.

“Nope. None whatsoever.”

“Even with these ears of mine?” Lafier scooped up her hair. They were pointy — the same ears as **Fleet Commander** Abliar, the man who had invaded the Hyde star system.

“This is the *üaritec* (WAHREET, unique family feature) of my lineage, the *nüic abliarser* (NOOEE AHBREEARSAR, ears of Abliar).”

“They were hidden inside your hair.”

“I see... My ears *are* small for an Abliar’s.” Judging by the tone of her voice, she’d occasionally felt insecure about them.

“Besides,” Jinto continued, “even if I had seen them, I don’t know that I would have cottoned on anyway. I’m not an Abh by birth, so I’m not used to giving **family features** much thought.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is,” Lafier nodded, moved.

“Yep, that’s how it is.” Jinto resumed walking.

Üaritec or “**family features**” were like the trademark physical characteristics of individual lines. They varied from the shape of body parts like the nose or ears, to the color of the eyes or hair. Where it manifested depended on the family. Whether they were **gentry** or **nobles**, the Abh obsessively saw to it that all descendants of a given family shared that one distinct physical feature. Naturally, they engraved it into their very genes.

Needless to say, **Abliar ears** were the most highly respected **family feature**. But Jinto had altogether forgotten about **family features** until just that moment.

Lafier walked with him shoulder-to-shoulder. “You really are an amusing one.”

“Cut it out, would ya?” Jinto shrugged. “So, I wanted to ask you about your experiences...”

“My experiences?”

“At the **academy**. You said nobody could relax when you were around?” Lafier urged him to continue with her eyes. “I’ve got my fair share of memories, too, let me tell you,” he said with a sheepish smile. “Though yours are probably on a whole different level.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know if you know... I was the only **noble** at my school.”

“Ahh...”

Because they all aimed to work under Abhs, the students of the Abh Linguistic and Cultural Institute were far removed from any anti-Abh sentiment. On the contrary, the majority intended to find success as **imperial citizens**, earn appointment as **gentry** if being **nobility** was unattainable, and make their descendants into Abhs.

To those students, the presence of a boy who had a **noble rank** lined up for him despite being a Lander was hard to stomach. He was the target of ridicule on the least pretext, and of vicious bullying wherever teachers weren’t looking. That said, there were also those who confused him with their abject servility.

No one knew how to deal with a **noble**.

“And I can’t blame them, either — it’s not like I had any idea, either.”

“In that case, you had a rougher time than me. The **trainee pupils** knew full well how they’re supposed to behave around an **imperial**. I simply didn’t *like* how they were supposed to behave around an imperial. I was treated with the proper cordiality and was paid all respects. And yet...” Lafier’s eyes turned reproachful. “If I had been you, I wouldn’t have let them bully me.”

“I’m a pacifist, Lafier,” he said with a shrug.

“Neither pacificism nor militarism have anything to do with it, surely.”

“Look, there were way more people than I could fight. There was animosity towards me even from the faculty.”

“I see...”

“Don’t worry, I learned how to get by quickly enough.”

“What did you have to do?” she asked, curious.

“I hid my rank.”

“You can hide your rank?” Lafier looked puzzled.

“I’m not as famous as you, *Fiac Lartnér*. Although...” Jinto shook his head. “I couldn’t hide it at school. Whenever I tried to put on an innocent face and chat with freshies, some old-timer with a big mouth would be there to make sure they found out.”

“So what did you do?”

“I went into town. In town, I made friends with **territorial citizens** who live without sparing the **Empire** a thought.”

“Wow. You’ve experienced more hardship than I expected.”

A pair of **NCCs** was about to pass by, but they stopped to give Jinto and Lafier a salute. Lafier saluted back, but didn’t break her stride.

“Umm...” said Jinto in hushed tones. “What am I supposed to do when things like that happen? Saluting them back would be weird, right?”

“You can just give them a nod.”

The **NCCs** had already passed by, so Jinto turned around and gave them a nod. Surprised, their hands flew back to the saluting position.

“Well, don’t do that, that’s just inconveniencing them,” Lafier chided him softly.

“You’re right.” Jinto sighed inwardly.

It played out better the next time they crossed paths with some **NCCs**.

Finally, they arrived in front of a door illustrated with a sunflower bathing in rays of daylight.

“This is your cabin.” Lafier pointed to the door.

Jinto studied it long and hard. “It’s been nagging at me — What are these paintings all about? What does this image *mean*, exactly?”

“It’s just decoration. It doesn’t ‘mean’ anything,” she said. “Even **warships** need some livening up. That’s probably what they thought.”

“But it’s jarring, isn’t it?” Jinto started whispering: “Aren’t there more spaceship-y subjects for decoration?”

“Like?”

“Like stars or galaxies; you know.”

“Who would paint such boring subjects?”

“I thought you guys loved the cosmos?” Jinto certainly didn’t expect that response.

“We do. It’s our home. But the stars are far too *everyday* to be in art. You can just look outside if you want to see the stars.”

“I mean, yeah, that’s true, but...

“Besides, paintings like these seem to help **NCCs** who come from **terrestrial worlds** mellow out.”

“I see...” Jinto closely observed the sunflower. “But what do you people think about it? Abhs, I mean?”

“How many times are you going to make me say it? You are an—”

“Right, I’m an Abh, too,” Jinto cut in. “But I’m not an Abh by birth. That’s why I’m curious how Abhs feel when they look at natural plant life.”

“I don’t think it’s any different from how surface peoples feel.” Lafier cocked an eyebrow. “We too are descended from the selfsame *glæc* (GLEH, humanity) that arose from Earth.”

“But you’ve never seen a real sunflower, right?”

“You have a distorted view of us, Jinto. I’ve seen sunflowers. There are botanical gardens in Lacmhacarrh (LAHKFAHKARR), and my house has a flower garden of its own.”

“All right.” Jinto turned around and pointed at the wall behind her. “Then what about that?”

It was a prairie. Realistic knee-length grass filled the piece, and on that grass

grazed elephants, horses, and other assorted animals. The scene was sparsely populated by trees, like pines and birches, and cherry blossom petals danced in the blue sky.

“I’ve never seen *that*, no,” she replied.

“So what are your thoughts on it?”

“Why are you asking? What do you get out of it?” She looked dubious.

“Come on,” he said. “Help me understand how native-born Abhs tick.”

“Very well.” Lafier nodded. “It looks dreamlike to me.”

“Dreamlike, as in it doesn’t exist in reality?”

“No.” She tilted her head. “I know it does exist in reality. I understand that our origins lie in lands like these. I guess I would say it’s like our founding myth.”

“The forsaken homeland.”

“Yes. But the *céssath* (KEHSAHTH, universe) is our home now. We are the one and only *céssatudec* (KEHSAHTOOD, people of the cosmos), and we’re proud of that.”

“Well, surface peoples are descended from interstellar travelers, too,” Jinto was quick to point out.

“Yes, *travelers*. The ancestors of surface peoples simply zipped from one point of the universe to another. We *live* among the stars. That is a sizeable difference, don’t you agree?”

“Maybe.” Though in truth, Jinto didn’t really know. What he did know was that there was something odd, something *alien* about the Abh. Whether that “something odd” had to do with their homeland apart from other humans wasn’t clear.

“What do you think, Jinto?” “Is it as boring for you as when we look at the stars? Oh, and by ‘we,’ I mean *native-born* Abhs. Because you’re also Abh.”

I guess whenever she says that, she’s being conscientious and thinking about me, in her own weird way. Maybe.

“No, it’s not boring. This isn’t exactly an everyday scene on **terrestrial worlds**

either, you know. Also, my home planet's ecosystem is different from other worlds'. This painting's ecosystem isn't so far removed from reality that it can be called *fantastical*, but I think it's really all over the place. To the eyes of a trained botanist, it would look fantastical — by the way, could you let me in? I don't know how to open the door."

"You're the one who sidetracked us with sunflowers," she pouted.

"But you've got to admit, it was interesting."

"Yes, I've never stared at a picture so intensely before." It seemed that at her core, she was the honest and unaffected type, this **First Princess of the Kingdom of Cryb**.

"Right then, open me up, if you please."

"You need but use your **compuwatch**. It's already registered to its signal."

"Ah, is that right?" Jinto touched the red stone to the side of the **compuwatch**'s display. The door opened.

Jinto took a look around the room from its threshold. "Goodness me, what do we have here?"

"Are you dissatisfied?"

"Far from it. I didn't think it would be this pristine."

It wasn't all that big. The bed took up the entire depth of the room, while it was only around twice as wide. In the space that wasn't taken up by the bed, there was a table and chair. At the back, there was another, small door. But the most eye-catching thing in the room, without a doubt, was the *gar-glac* (GAR GLAH, coat-of-arms banner) hanging on the bed-side wall. The coat of the arms of the **Countdom of Hyde**.

A red *rezwan* had been embroidered on a green background. What was a rezwan? It didn't look so dissimilar to a bird, but it was a species of furry-fish that swum the seas of the planet Martinh. The specimens in the wild were, even accounting for the fact it was a fish, extremely dimwitted. And yet, it had an inexplicable stateliness to it.

"Your bags will have been put in there." She pointed to the storage shelves

opposite the bed. “If you want to get clean, use that door.”

Jinto opened the door at the back. Just as he thought, a lavatory and bathroom were furnished for him.

“This is awesome. What is this room? Is it for temporary passengers or something?”

“This is a **patrol ship**, Jinto. It’s a standard room for a starpilot.”

“I just hope I didn’t take somebody’s pad.”

“Worry not. For **warships** of **patrol ship**-size, living quarters are planned out with extra space. You never know when non-officer passengers need to board, after all.”

“Good.” Jinto turned his attention to the **banner** on the wall. “Where’d that thing come from?”

“Ah, it must have been made aboard ship,” she said nonchalantly.

“What, for me?”

“Who else would it be of any use for, besides you?”

It’s not much use to me, either...

Jinto shrugged gently. He felt no affection for that hastily improvised **coat of arms**. It hadn’t been long after the establishment of the **count’s household** that he’d laid eyes on it for the first time, and so up until the day prior he’d utterly forgotten they’d even had a coat of arms.

Jinto patted around his bed to gauge its comfiness. It was soft enough to assure him he’d be sleeping just fine.

Jinto took a seat on his bed. “So, what do I do now?”

“Right.” Lafier checked the time on her **compuwatch**. “It will be dinner time in two hours. You’ll most likely be invited to the **captain’s** table. When the time comes, I’ll come pick you up, so be patient and wait here.”

“You don’t need to go out of your way for me; if you just call me on the **telephone** I’m sure I can get there on my own. You must have work to do, right?”

“That will be enough of that nonsense.” Lafier’s expression turned serious. “I’ve been tasked with being your guard tomorrow as well. I advise you not to amble around on your own until after tomorrow. Since the founding of the **Star Forces**, there have been countless new recruits and civilians who believed they could get around by reading the onboard guide maps, only to nearly turn into mummies in deserted storage decks.”

“And you? Did you get lost, too?” Jinto needled.

“I don’t appreciate untoward questions that open old wounds, Jinto,” replied the **Apprentice Starpilot**.

“I see you’ve got some fun stories to share,” Jinto smiled.

“Shut up, Jinto,” Lafier shut him down. “Need anything else from me?”

“Nope. Thank you. I’m fine just killing time here, so I’ll be good and wait for you.”

“Then I’ll see you in two hours.”

“See you in two.”

Lafier turned right around, and closed the door behind her.

Jinto decided to use this time for a warm shower. As he took off his shoes, he suddenly realized, with a start, how relaxed he was. All the nervousness he’d felt before boarding the patrol ship disappeared like a bad dream.

Chapter 6: *Raisriamrhoth* (RESREEAHMRROHTH, A State of Emergency) It was Day 5 since the patrol ship Goslauth's departure from the Vorlash Countdom.

"Captain." Deca-commander Reiria's voice sounded close to her ears.

The patrol ship Goslauth's captain, **Hecto-commander** *Laicch Üémh Laubér Placiäc* (LEKSHOO WEF LOHBEHR PLAHKEEA, or "Lexshue") soon opened her eyes and looked up at her bedside occupant. The hologram of the Vice-Captain floated hazily in the darkness. He was on duty now.

"What?"

"Please come to the **bridge** right now." He wore an incongruously grave expression on his miniature face (about a tenth the size of the genuine article). "Unidentified **space-time bubbles** have been spotted."

"I'll be there in no time." Hecto-commander Lexshue waved a hand to break the **telephonic connection** and sprung to her feet. Swiftly and skillfully, she threw on her pure-black **military uniform**, fixed her sleep-tousled dark bluish-gray hair with a comb, and equipped her **one-winged circlet**. Then she took her **decorative sash-belt** and **command staff** in hand, and beat a quick path toward the bridge.

Within the **elevator-tube** leading to the bridge, she briskly wrapped the belt around her waist and "sheathed" her command staff in it. By the time she arrived at the bridge, she was all clad in a captain's formal garb.

Lexshue rushed onto the bridge and shouted, "Reiria, your report!"

"Orientation, 78 degrees ahead. Distance, 1,539.17 *cédlairh* (KEDLEHERR). Direction, 18 degrees ahead. They're heading for the *Læbehynh Sfagnaumr* (LEBUHYOONYUH SFAHGNOHM, Marquessate of Sfagnoff)." After **Deca-commander** Reiria finished informing her, he offered the captain's seat in which he'd been sitting (as he'd been on duty in her stead).

But she didn't take it. "Sfganoff is our next scheduled port of call."

"That is correct," Reiria nodded. "I'm certain we'll reach it before they do, of course."

"How many did you spot?"

"We've confirmed the presence of 120 **space-time bubbles**. Their total mass is about 90 *zesaboc* (ZESAHBO). If it's a fleet, that's equivalent to four *iadbyrec* (YAHDBYLOOR, sub-fleets)."

Lexshue gazed at the *iac fadr* (YAH FAHD, map of flat space) projected on the floor. At its center, there was a blue blip indicating the patrol ship's location. A number of **gates** coiled like dark spirals.

The **gates** of **normal space** had next to no mass, but they radiated energy. As such, they were always repelling against solar winds. Consequently, it was common practice to place them on the outskirts of star systems.

However, when a **gate** was placed beyond an event horizon, it would receive energy pressure in excess of the amount of energy it radiated. In such cases, unlike the majority of **gates**, energy would get funneled from **normal space** to **flat space**. This phenomenon was referred to as the *cigamh* (KEEGAHF, volcano).

The energy erupting from the *cigamh* then became *spuflasath* (SPOOFLAHSATH, space-time particles — compressed fourth-dimensional space-time with about four times the mass of electrons). The *spuflasath* flowed from areas of greater particle-density to less dense areas, and popped back into **normal space** upon encountering another **gate**. Thusly did the energy that humanity once used for interstellar travel originate.

Space-time bubbles interacted with *spuflasath* **space-time particles** by absorbing them and radiating them back out, with the amount emitted greater than the amount taken in. That gap had to be compensated for by the energy poured into the **space-time bubble engine**. That was the toll they had to pay to **flat space**.

In addition to **space-time particles**, **space-time bubbles** also emitted *saiserazz* (SESRAHZ, mass-waves). Just like the electromagnetic waves in **normal space**,

these mass-waves theoretically permeated all of space, penetrating space-time bubbles as well. Therefore, the presence of space-time bubbles could be detected even from extreme distances.

Around 60 degrees to the right of their current direction, an assemblage of **mass-waves** appeared and disappeared across three **gates** — Not even mass-waves could penetrate the **gates**.

Something out of the ordinary was upon them. The **captain** had no need to contemplate their situation to be sure of that.

If it had been an allied force moving a **fleet** that size, she would have been informed beforehand. If they had been thrust into flight just like that, it could only mean there was some emergency to deal with. If they weren't their allies... then the ramifications went without saying.

She wanted to ask the mysterious group of **space-time bubbles** about their situation, but the physical laws of **flat space** unfortunately forbade it: mass-waves couldn't be used for transmissions. The wavelength and frequency of mass-waves were both set in stone by the physics of **flat space**. If the mass of the **space-time bubble** could be changed, mass-waves could be viable as a means of communication, but gravity-control technology didn't alter an object's mass, and so it was of no help in this case.

The only effective method of establishing communications between **space-time bubbles** involved propelling **space-time particles**. This *droch flactaider* (DROHSH FLAHTEH DAR, inter-bubble communication), however, was almost unbearably slow, and useless unless the bubbles were very close.

"Do we know which **gate** they came through?" asked Lexshue.

"I'm having **Rearguard Starpilot** Rehecryac (RESHECRYOOA) do the calculations," answered Reiria.

At last, Rehecryac, the fairly green young **starpilot** and *rilbigac* (REELBEEGA, navigator), made his report. "I've narrowed it down to 47 gates, but that's all I can do."

"Are there any of those 47 currently being used?" said Lexshue.

He looked up at Captain Lexshue and shook his head. "No, they're all **closed**

gates no one's using at all."

"What about **gates** that have inhabited planets within a light-year of them?"

Rehecryac ran a search of old documents pertaining to *byrec ragrér* (BYOOR RAHGREHR, exploration fleets) using his **thought crystals**. "There are none."

"How about within five light-years?" Lexshue expanded the scope.

"There is one! Just one!" Rehecryac's cheeks flushed red with excitement.

"Where?"

"It's the planet Bascotton IV of the Bascotton Star System, 4.1 light-years away from *Saudec Ceutesocnbina Céïcr* (SOHD KYEUTOHSHCHNBEENA CAYC, Gate 193 of Caysh). It belongs to... the United Humankind!"

Reiria came by her side and whispered, "I think we've crossed paths with a business rival of ours."

In the past, the Abh sailed their secret, giant ship, the Abliar (named, of course, after the surname of the **Imperial Household**), through eight different **closed gates**, wandering the universe as armed merchants. Though technically "merchants," relying on imports for food and quotidian items was not very wise when they didn't know when they would encounter any trade partners. After all, everything needed for everyday life was produced within the ship itself.

The one thing they considered of equal value, the main product they paid for, was *information*.

The history, technology, scientific papers, and artwork of each human society became commodities. These human societies, separated as they were by dozens and sometimes even hundreds of light-years of nothingness, craved information regarding their far-flung brethren, and the city-ship Abliar would provide that service as the only line they had, however fraught with uncertainty.

The Abh might not have put much stock in the idea of "mutual support," for trade with them was decidedly one-sided: they showed what they could supply buyers with, and gave it a price. Despite being merchants, they took a dislike to hairsplitting bargaining, quickly leaving star systems whenever negotiations

broke down. And whenever they felt they had been taken for a ride, they would also leave — but only after exacting what, in their eyes, was a fitting revenge. Often enough, they would come to realize that it had been an unfortunate misunderstanding, but by that time they were already hundreds of years away from the ones they ought to have apologized to. Though the Abh did hold justice and fairness in esteem, they didn't respect those lofty ideals quite enough to go out of their way to retrace their steps to express their regret.

Among the **terrestrial worlds**, the Abh earned themselves a reputation for haughtiness and recklessness. It was after the founding of their **Empire** that the Abh expanded, but that prior, mercantile era saw the birth of their initial incarnation out of some unknown star system.

Finally, the Abh, who had gathered up the essential kernels of all human science, established the *Clofairh Fadhotr* (CLOHFEHRR FAHDTHOHT, Theory of Flat Space Navigation). They chose a star system in which to settle so they could conduct experiments to open the **gates**. When they succeeded after 50 years of experimentation, they decided to monopolize the technology.

Up to that point in time, every human world was separated from each other by vast stretches, so interstellar war simply could not occur. But the *fazz fadhotr* (FAHZ FAHDTHOHT, flat space navigation technology) had now made it possible. Of course, this didn't change how vast space was, but humans are ingenious at finding cause for war. If multiple different societies got their hands on the technology, it would inevitably lead to a large-scale war, and managing it monopolistically was the only way to prevent that.

Nonetheless, there was scientific theory, and then there was technology. It wasn't a scandal, so even if they laid down an airtight gag order, there was no doubt somebody would find out eventually. That was why the Abh then decided to uphold the monopoly by uniting all of humanity... by force.

According to statistics, when the **Founding Emperor**, Dunei, decreed the founding of the **Empire**, the total population of the Abh numbered 272,904. As the estimations of Abh population scholars had it, though the margin of error was sizeable, the total human population of the cosmos was over 100 billion. A people of fewer than 300,000 was to conquer and rule over all of humanity, 100 billion strong. Haughty and reckless, they truly were.

Unfortunately for them, however, they were not, in fact, the first among humanity to step into the realm of **flat space**. One settler civilization, in the Soomay Star System, managed to stumble upon a way to utilize flat space by pure chance. The Soomaynians didn't monopolize the technology. With great generosity (and a not-so-generous price tag), they shared it with twenty other systems.

Upon incorporating five star-systems into the **Empire**, the Abh noticed there had been prior visitors to **flat space**. This caused them dread and discomfort. The policies of the Soomay Star System were needlessly complicating the political situation of the universe, or so reckoned the Abh.

They asserted that universal affairs were best at their simplest, and that the simplest state would involve a single, all-encompassing system of government. The race that carried the burdens of the universe on its shoulders could only be the Abh, as surface peoples did not love space as they did. Landers had only to pursue happiness on their own worlds, for the entire cosmos to get along in perfect bliss. Sadly for them, the other interstellar nations had their own thoughts on the matter, so the contentions of the **Empire** had no persuasive power.

The Abh also knew well enough to honor vested interests, so they refrained from meddling with the star systems that had bought Soomay's technology, but they had no intention whatsoever of mimicking Soomay's behavior. So, when they came across a **terrestrial world** that had no knowledge of **flat space navigation technology**, they proceeded to conquer it with no reservation.

Human societies unfolded exactly as they had feared. Each interstellar nation seemed intent on finding points of conflict with each other, opening hostilities for reasons impartial parties couldn't comprehend. The **Empire** observed these epoch-forging wars with relish, and took to viewing the nations conducting them as children indulging in a bizarre pastime. But when they could no longer avoid it, they, too, became another participant in the strife.

In wartime, the Abh knew neither mercy, nor bounds. Once war was declared, any possibility of a compromise was lost. They would not lay down arms until they had robbed the enemy of their navigational capabilities, dismantled it, and subsumed their entire star system into the **Empire**.

This viciousness sparked equally severe counteraction. Many of the **Empire's** most distinguished members, including two **emperors** and seven **crown princes**, scattered across space.

However, it was always the **Humankind Empire of Abh** that sang the song of victory in the end. This **Empire**, ruled by an almost alien race that didn't see war as an extension of diplomacy, was deemed by the other interstellar nations as an enigmatic threat.

The nations continually united and divided, but overall, they tended to decrease in number. As of now, there were only four distinct, sovereign nations remaining, excluding the **Empire**. In order of power and influence, they were the United Humankind or "UH," the Hania Federation, the Greater Alkont Republic, and the People's Sovereign Stellar Union or "PSSU." The United Humankind, the largest of these, had a population of 600 billion. Taken together, all four had a population of 1.1 trillion. While each of these states differed from each other in small ways, they had all been founded on constitutions that championed democracy.

12 years prior, the four nations convened at the United Humankind's star system of Nova Sicilia to forget their squabbles and sign a pact. They were now military allies. While which nation they'd formed an alliance against wasn't spelled out, it could only be the one nation they hadn't invited — the **Humankind Empire of Abh**.

The Nova Sicilia Accords styled its signatories the "Member-Nations of the Nova Sicilia Treaty Organization." However, since they preferred to self-identify as democracies, the **Empire** called them the *Brubhoth Gos Synr* (BROOVOTH GOHS SYIN, Four Nations Alliance or "FNA").

The point of the alliance was to make the **Empire** feel the heat and take a more conciliatory tack. And yet, the **Empire** reacted favorably to the Nova Sicilia Accords. That was because their enemies had all but declared themselves as such, and, as a consequence, universal affairs had gotten very simple indeed.

Since that time, they looked upon each other with scorn, but while relations between the **Empire** and the Nations of the Treaty remained antagonistic, they were peaceful. However, over the past year, that low-key rivalry steadily grew

into something more serious. According to the statements of the Treaty Organization, what caused tensions to ratchet up was the **Abh Empire's** conquest of the Hyde Star System.

Lexshue saw through that flimsy pretext. The Conquest of Hyde had occurred seven years ago. The Treaty Organization issued its perfunctory tandem statements of protest at the time, but went completely silent about it afterward. And yet, it seemed they'd conveniently rediscovered that the Conquest of Hyde was an unforgivable act of belligerence a year or so ago. There weren't any recent developments of note on **the Countdom of Hyde**; any new developments of sufficient importance can only have happened within the FNA.

"So that's it," murmured Lexshue.

Reiria raised an eyebrow. "What is?"

Lexshue smiled wryly. "Oh, nothing. It's just that **the FNA** has really been keen on starting a war, judging by their actions. Am I wrong? All of their demands have been over-the-top; they want us not only to relinquish control over **the Countdom**, but to give them a corridor into **Empire** territory so they can 'guard' it. They must know the Empire would never make concessions like that."

"But what of it?"

"In other words, they've made their preparations, so all they need is an excuse."

"Ah, I see. They must have spent quite some time preparing."

They collected the **closed gates** drifting across **normal space**, and experimented with opening them. Meanwhile, they had no way of knowing whether there were any **gates** in **flat space** placed at points that suited their purposes unless they tried opening them.

How many gates must they have looked into to find one under Abh control? In addition, to carry a gate that met their requirements through normal space to a point near a peopled planet — or, to put it differently, a point near a gate already in use...

In order to do such a thing, they would have to wait for the **gate** to close

again. When an **open gate** was left to its own devices in a low-energy state, it naturally turned into a **closed gate**. However, its half-life is 12 years.

“It’d be a miracle if this plan of theirs didn’t take at least a decade. Well, their miracle, our nightmare.”

Reiria agreed. “They started this endeavor before the birth of the **Countdom of Hyde**, of that we can be certain.”

“Yes, and that whole Hyde issue is a very recent one. In fact, the Nova Sicilia Accords might have been signed with this scheme in mind.”

“What I don’t understand,” said Reiria, his hands outstretched, “is why they would bother with such transparent lies.”

“Oh, the only ones they’re fooling are themselves.”

“You mean this is an act of self-delusion...? I’m afraid I’m no closer to grasping their motivations.”

“I’m not exactly an expert on their inner psyches, either. I just figure they’d like to believe that justice is on their side.”

“What an honor — to them, we must be the embodiments of evil!” Reiria’s moustache curled as he sneered.

Now Lexshue raised an eyebrow. “What, Reiria, you didn’t know? We’re born aggressors and mass murderers. You need to sit down and read a UH textbook one of these days. You’ll learn all about how every calamity was perpetrated by the Abh...”

At that moment, she was interrupted by a *drociac* (DROHKEEA, communications officer) assigned to the investigation mission who had something to report. “There’s been a shift in the fleet of enemy **space-time bubbles!**”

The young **linewing starpilot** had prematurely identified the **space-bubbles** as “enemies,” yet no one intended to correct him.

Lexshue’s eyes fixed on the unidentified **space-time bubbles**. “Each individual **bubble** split into ten. They’ve changed course and are heading toward us. Judging by their total mass, I think it’s actually a single bubble, belonging to a

gairh (GERR, assault ship) class vessel.”

The velocity of **space-time bubbles** was solely based on mass. There was no avenue of technological improvement on that front; it’s simply how physics works. As one might imagine, the lighter the mass, the faster it went. Because typical fleets were accompanied by massive vessels like **battle-line warships** and *isadh* (EESAHDTH, transport freighters), they were even slower than patrol ships. But it was a different story for fleets composed only of smaller vessels like **assault ships**.

It was now clear: the objective of the group of **space-time bubbles** that had split into ten was the capture of the Goslauth.

“When will our guests enter the range of the *hocsath* (mines)?”

The **communications officer** soon worked it out.

“Around 21:15 ship’s-time.” They had about four hours.

“**Vice-Captain**,” said the **captain**. Her voice turned far firmer than before.

“Initiate *ïocsdozbhoth mata* (YOHGDOHZVOHTH MAHTA, Stage 2 War Preparations). I plan to shift to *ïocsdozbhoth casna* (CAHSNA, Stage 1) at 20:30 ship’s-time. **Senior gunner**, give me your tactical analysis. We need to know what our chances of victory are.”

Even as Lexshue handed down her orders, concern for the non-personnel onboard — the **young noble of Hyde** and the **princess** — flashed through her mind.

Jinto was grappling with the *riüérh cnassotr cénrur sazoïr* (REEWEHRR CNASSOHT KENROOR SAZOYR, quartermasters’ academy school rules). If what the **recruiting office** had told him regarding **starpilots** was to be believed, all students were expected to drill these rules into their brains before their first day. But it was impossible! Jinto cursed using the dirtiest word in all of Delktunian.

When he’d been handed the *ghaich* (JESH, memory crystal) at the **office**, he’d had no inkling of just how much text it had been hiding. It had obviously never occurred to whoever compiled this list of rules that deleting outdated ones was a possibility. Instead, they resorted to smoothing it all over... by introducing

even more, *supplementary* rules. The **imperial-calendar** date of each amendment was listed alongside all the dozens of screens' worth of rules.

And my first day at the academy starts at the beginning of next month... Some responsibility lay squarely on his shoulders, as he didn't even take a peek at its contents before boarding, but he felt it a curse nonetheless.

Jinto set about committing the "Lunch Etiquette" section to memory. First, he looked at the end of the passage to see whether it hadn't been altogether repealed, and then he began to memorize all 122 articles. He skimmed over the obvious, and pored over the items he deemed different enough from his own everyday intuitions.

Just as Jinto was getting absorbed in the task, the *dunitic* (DOONEET, alarm claxon) screeched. Distracted from his **compuwatch**'s screen, Jinto lifted his head.

What could this alarm be about? Thinking maybe the **list of rules** had the answer, he flipped to the Table of Contents screen. But there had been no need: the onboard announcement soon said it all.

"Attention. This is your **captain** speaking. All hands, continue working but listen well. At a distance of around 1,540 *cédlairhdue* 78 degrees ahead of the ship, an unidentified group of **space-time bubbles** has been spotted in transit. We think that its destination is the same as ours — the **Marquessate of Sfagnoff**." The captain let that sink in for everybody listening.

"Now, listen up, boys and girls: At this rate, we know we'll reach Sfagnoff quicker than they will. The thing is, they don't seem to like that very much. So they sent ten **assault ship** bubbles our way. We don't know what hole they crawled out of, but we're fairly sure they're a UH **fleet**. It looks like we've got a fight on our hands, everyone!"

Is this some kind of training? thought Jinto. No, that was tough to believe. It sounded too real.

"This is NOT a drill." Lexshue's voice genially confirmed it for him. "I repeat, this is NOT a drill. If they don't back down, we'll charge into battle at around 21:15 ship's time. Prior to that, we're planning to shift to Stage 1 War Preparations at 20:30 ship's time. Personnel not currently on duty should rest

up for the fight to come. I'll say it one last time, so that it can really sink in, my dears. This is not a drill. This is not an exercise. This has been your **captain**. Over and out."

Jinto stared at the ceiling, dumbfounded. He tried to sort the information he'd just heard in his head.

We're charging into battle!? He could scarcely believe it.

As far as Jinto knew, the **Empire** was not in a state of war, and this sector was in the Abh domain. Wasn't this supposed to be the lap of safety?

Practically dizzy, Jinto stared at the **coat-of-arms banner**, but it could not save him. So, he trained his sight back on his screen. He had no idea what he should do, what actions he was supposed to take. All he knew was that this was no time to sit tight and study. He turned off his **compuwatch**.

What do I do...?

He hesitated to demand an explanation, to rush out onto the bridge or pounce on the phone. Even if he was totally informed, how would it help any?

"Jinto, are you in?" Lafier's voice called through the coms.

Jinto jumped on it like a famished cat given fresh fish. "Of course! Come in, Lafier, come in!"

The door opened, but Lafier stayed outside the threshold. "What the heck is going on?"

"It's just as they said. I don't know any more than you do," she told him. "It seems we just happen to be witnessing the beginnings of a war."

"Just our luck," grumbled Jinto. Life was truly a parade of happy accidents, and it was never very difficult to stumble over the next in line. "I'd just love it if it could be over by the time I'm assigned somewhere."

"I don't think there's much hope of that," she responded. "We aren't the types to let wars end without our utter satisfaction, and our enemies are most likely the United Humankind. I can't be sure the war will end within my *lifetime*..."

"Lafier, you are *really* bad at cheering people up," sighed Jinto.

“Never mind that. I was ordered to escort you to the **bridge**. Will you be ready to come soon?”

“I shall be coming forthwith.” Jinto stood up and put on his **circlet**, that of the **Hyde noble prince** he was. “I wonder if they’ll arrange special seating for me to watch the battle.”

“I think you should try asking them,” replied Lafier coldly.

When they arrived at the bridge, Jinto could sense a strange mood in the air. It was so tense that it felt as though the air had turned to glass.

“I’m sorry to have troubled you to come here, *Lonh*,” said Lexshue. “I bid both you and **Apprentice Starpilot** Ablïar wait here.”

“Yes, Captain,” said Lafier. She was standing at attention, behind and to the side of Jinto.

“*Lonh-ïarlucec Dreur*. I’m afraid we have not prepared any seating for you.” The **Hecto-commander** gazed at Jinto from her captain’s seat.

“Please don’t worry about that. I’m fine standing.”

“I’m sure you grasped the onboard broadcast.”

“I did. I’m to understand there’ll be a battle.”

The **captain** nodded. “The probability we win is 0.37%. That is assuming the enemy ships are leading-edge, but even if they were a crew of nothing but novices piloting decrepit ships, our chances still wouldn’t reach the 50% mark.”

“Well, that’s not good.” Even though death was imminent, Jinto was bizarrely calm. None of it felt real. Perhaps he was mentally paralyzed with fear.

“No, it’s not. Getting away would be ideal, but unfortunately we’re not in any position to do so,” she smiled. “That is why we must have you evacuate the ship, *Lonh*.”

“I see,” Jinto nodded. It was a reasonable proposal. *Ménh* (MENYUH, interstellar ships) were assemblies of advanced technology. The crew who could get one traveling through space, even the lowest-ranked *sach gona* (SAHSH GOHNA, fourth-class NCCs), all had to undergo at least a year of technical training before being assigned. Even if some noble desire to be responsible or

whatnot awakened within Jinto, his complete lack of technical know-how meant that even if he were to offer his aid, it would be an unwanted kindness. The greatest contribution he could make in the war effort would be to get out of the way and shiver in a corner of his room.

There was, however, a problem. How and where was he meant to disembark while the patrol ship was still sailing through **flat space**? He knew that the captain would continue, though, so he kept quiet.

“There is a *pairriac* (PEREEA, connecting vessel) aboard ship. It is furnished with *ménragh* (MENRAHZH, flat space navigation capabilities). Please take it and reach Sfagnoff before us. You will have to resupply on the way, but you should get there faster than that fleet of **time-space bubbles** regardless. Then, when you arrive, please catch another ship for yourself. Sfagnoff has a **base** for a *byrec drocr* (BYOOR DROHK, liaison fleet). Flights should be frequent enough that you won’t have to rely on luck,” she said, casting a fleeting glimpse at what was behind Jinto.

“I’m sure Apprentice Starpilot Abliar will be willing to accompany you to the Marquessate of Sfagnoff.”

“Captain, you can’t be serious!” Lafier shouted in protest. “I don’t have a *busespas* (BOOESPAHS, skipper’s insignia)!”

“You’re in the process of becoming one,” the **Hecto-commander** pointed out. “Once you’ve finished this voyage, you’ll earn the insignia automatically. It’s nothing more than a formality. I know you can steer it, **Apprentice**.”

“But I want to stay on this ship...”

“I have no intention of debating with an **apprentice starpilot**. Am I not the **captain** of this ship?” She pulled the captain card on her.

But she didn’t give an inch. “I cannot accept that. Please forgive me my impudence, but I cannot shame the Abliar family name by fleeing from the enemy...”

The captain stood up and glared at Lafier with her golden eyes.

“You should save the braggadocio for after you’ve got an *almfac matbrar* (AHLFA MAHBRAR, twin-winged circlet) on your head, *Abliarsec Néic-Dubreuscr*

Bærh Parhynr Lamhirh. Fleeing from the enemy? There is no battle station for you here. You are utterly superfluous. You are unfinished goods. Yet I have given you a mission. A mission of grave importance, for you are not only to take the civilian Lonh-*ĭarlucec Dreur* away from the warzone, but also to warn the **Empire** of the approach of what is thought to be an enemy fleet. Would you not agree that shirking that mission would be the true act of desertion? If you do not feel any shame in your own incompetence, in not knowing what constitutes ‘fleeing from the enemy,’ then the Abliar family does not deserve the fealty of the Abh. If you still have something to say to me, then I will have you restrained for insubordination. You may talk back to me when you can do so with impartiality at a *luzæc fanigalacr* meeting as an abdicant empress worthy of the name!”

Jinto, who was still between the two, could only stand there, shaken. He’d suddenly fallen from the main character of his story to a mere onlooker, spying goings-on from the sidelines.

Lafier turned pale, biting her lower lip. But, being Lafier, she didn’t hang her head in shame or break eye contact with the **captain**.

“I was mistaken, **Captain**,” said the **princess**.

“I’m glad you understand,” nodded Lexshue. “Now prepare the **connecting vessel** for takeoff. I have more to say to Lonh-*ĭarlucec Dreur*.”

“Roger.” Lafier saluted her. “I will prepare the *pairriac* at once.”

“Once you’re finished, simply send me your report. There’s no need to come back here.”

“...Understood.” For a brief moment, Lafier and Lexshue’s lines of sight intertwined.

“Now then, please be off.” Lexshue’s tone had suddenly turned much softer. “We’ll see each other again at Lacmhacarth, *far fiac cfaina* (FAR FEEA CFENA, my dear Highness).”

“Yes, Captain. Without fail.” Lafier looked like she had more to say, too, yet she did another salute and turned back.

As soon as the **Captain** saw Lafier’s back disappear, she faced Jinto once more

and said: “Lonh-*ïarlucec Dreur*, you won’t have much time or space. Please take the minimum number of personal belongings necessary.”

“I intend to,” said Jinto, “since I’m confident I’ll be able to retrieve whatever I leave behind at the **capital**.”

“I apologize that we couldn’t see through our duty to send you off at the **capital**.”

“Don’t worry; from living in Vorlash, I’m used to transportation disruptions.”

“Hearing you say that eases my stress. Incidentally...”

“What is it?”

“There’s something else we’d like you to carry in addition to your personal effects.”

“And that would be?”

Lexshue faced the space behind her captain’s seat. “Arms storage, open. **Hecto-commander** Laicch *Üémh Laubér Placiäc*.”

The wall opened up. Within lay a veritable arsenal of individual-use weapons.

Starpilots of the **Star Forces** had long abandoned the practice of carrying weapons with them aboard ship. All that remained of that custom was the now-**decorative sash-belts** that they wore. However, those personal arms were stored onboard in case scenarios such as a hostile working environment or a crew mutiny were to transpire — although it should be mentioned, for the sake of the Star Forces’ honor, that such a thing had not happened in the past 200 years.

Lexshue chose two *clanh* (CLAHNYUH, phasers), and gave them to Jinto alongside *ïapérh* (YAHPEHRR, gun magazines) and a **belt**.

“One for you, Lonh, and one I must ask you hand to **Apprentice Starpilot** Abliär. She should already know how to use them.”

“Why are weapons necessary?” Jinto had misgivings, but he took the guns.

“Think of them as a precaution.” She glanced at the **map of flat space** on the floor. “My guess is that they’re just the advance units of an enemy invasion

fleet. Reason being, if that weren't the case, there wouldn't be much point to devoting manpower to stopping this ship. But in their heads, they can't clear the subconscious doubt that they're just being driven by an instinctual urge to kill."

"So, in other words... by the time we reach Sfagnoff, you'll have already fallen?"

"Though I'm hoping that doesn't come to pass," said the **Hecto-commander**, nodding ever so slightly.

Jinto thought he understood that Lexshue was truly driving at. "**Captain...** The real reason you're doing this is to let **Her Highness** escape, isn't it? But isn't there somebody who's far more suited to escorting her than the likes of me?"

Jinto shut his mouth, paralyzed by her piercing eyes of gold.

Even then, she remained polite in her speech toward him.

"Please do not misunderstand. We always aim to avoid combat when carrying civilians, and take measures to ensure their safety when combat is inevitable. That is a duty entrusted to all **Star Forces** commanders. It's also no lie that **Apprentice Starpilot** Abl'iar has no predetermined battle position. Even if she had been no-name **gentry**, I would have entrusted her with commanding the **connecting vessel**."

Jinto cast his eyes down. "I'm sorry I said that. It was dumb." He was not as strong as Lafier.

Her glare softened. "That being said, I would be lying if I said I wasn't happy that **Her Highness** happens to be an **apprentice starpilot**."

"You are thinking about her wellbeing as well, **Captain**."

"I am." Her lips curled into a smile. "Her social standing may not technically matter within the military, but she could still someday be **Empress**. And, just maybe, a wiser and greater one than we might expect. Thus, I aspire to one day be able to say that I was instrumental to her education during her years as an **apprentice**. How could I let such a budding flower wither before its time?"

"You're right."

“Now, I think it would be best if you depart soon. I would be grateful if you could go back to your room to pack your belongings. I’m sorry I can’t escort you, but I understand you know your way to the **takeoff deck**, correct?”

“I’ll be all right,” said Jinto. “Oh yeah, one thing — the **coat-of-arms** banner of my house that you had made for me. I’m going to leave it there, in anticipation of the day I can receive it again in commemoration of joining the ship.”

Her golden eyes flickered with intrigue. “That is thoughtfulness worthy of a **noble**, Lonh.”

“Really? Then I’m glad!” He’d interpreted her words as praise, and bowed.

“Please excuse me, **Captain**; I’ll be taking my leave.”

“Lonh-*ïarlucec Dreur*. I leave *Fïac Lartnér* in your hands.”

“I can’t think of a situation so hopeless that **Her Highness** would need to rely on me...” Jinto bowed deeply. “But I’ll do what I can if the time ever comes.”

Chapter 7: The *Slachoth Goslauth* (SLAHSHOHTH GOHSLOHT, Battle of the Goslauth) “The connecting vessel is splitting off from our space-time.”

At the report of the *drociac raugrhothasairr* (DROHKEEA ROYRROTHAHSEHR, surveying communications officer), **Hecto-commander** Lexshue nodded silently. The great throng already gathered on the **bridge**, comprising all necessary personnel, was as on-edge as ever.

Not counting the campaign of little consequence that was the Conquest of Hyde, the last time the **Star Forces** had shown their superiority was during the Battle for Camintale, 47 years prior. The current Empress, Lamagh (LAMAHZH), had fought in that campaign as **Crown Princess** and **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, a time that felt like a lifetime ago even to the long-lived Abh.

Of course, there was no one on the **patrol ship** Goslauth who had any actual combat experience. It was little wonder they were all bundles of nerves.

It was **Vice Captain** Reiria who was the first among them to recapture his usual composure.

“So the young ones have left,” he told his **captain** from behind her.

“I hope nothing happens to them.” Lexshue rested her chin in her hands as she stared at the blue blip getting farther and farther away from them.

“I hope so, too.” Then Reiria smiled. “They’ve both had very unique upbringings. In the future, they may just grow to be fascinating characters indeed. Though they’re probably fascinating enough as it is.”

“You’re not wrong,” Lexshue concurred.

The **royal princess** had been raised in a **royal house**, seen as the spring of all that is Abh. And she had been admitted into an **academy** at the young age of 13. She was the model Abh. Meanwhile, *ïarlucec Dreur* was an **imperial noble**, but an idiosyncratic one that couldn’t help but drag his Lander-ness with him

wherever he went. The two were almost polar opposites.

“I also hope they exert a positive influence on each other as well,” Reiria continued.

“My my, Reiria.” Surprised, Lexshue turned to look at him. “You’re thinking like a regular *besaiga* (BESEGA, instructor). Are you planning to switch careers and head to an **academy**?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Reiria with a wave of his hand. “I don’t have the character necessary to be responsible for someone’s education. I’m far more comfortable on the front lines. Especially now that a war is brewing.”

“Come now, you don’t need to hold yourself back. I won’t think you a coward.”

“I wouldn’t blame you for calling me a coward if I should ever petition to be transferred to a behind-the-scenes post. But as of now, I have no desire to do so.”

“Aww. That’s too bad.”

“Am I that terrible a **vice-captain**?” Reiria smiled ironically.

“I’ll keep you in suspense until your performance review.” Lexshue returned the smile. Then she looked straight ahead once again. “What are your thoughts on Lonh-*İarlucec Dreur*, Mr. **Instructor**?”

“I think he’s a fine young man. He’s always silently questioning whether what he does measures up to Abh standards. I’ve grown rather fond of the look in those eyes of his.”

“I like him, too.” She grinned as she recalled her time with him. “I liked how often he smacks you with blunt, straightforward questions. I’ve never given the nature of our race as much thought as I have in the past five days.”

“Lonh is a little too outspoken to be a well-behaved **imperial citizen**. He should dial it down a little, for his own sake.”

“That *is* him dialing it down.”

“I believe that the time she spends with Lonh will do **Her Highness** some good, though.”

“Agreed. Bringing those two together might be my greatest accomplishment. But only if they do manage to make it to the **capital**.”

“You’re quite worried about them, aren’t you?” There was a hint of laughter in Reiria’s voice.

“What, I can’t worry about them?” She shot her vice-captain a defiant look.

“I’d say that our situation is the more worrying one. That’s why you sent them off to begin with. I don’t think we have time to spare worrying about them. Though it pains me to find fault with the feelings of my superior officer.”

“You, feeling guilty for criticizing a superior? Now this is an amazing development.” The **captain** stared at the steadily approaching band of yellow blips. “But it’s just as you say. Now is the time to fulfill my responsibility to my crew.”

It was 19:37.

“**Captain**.” It was **Senior Communications Officer and Rearguard Starpilot Ynséryac**. “The unidentified **space-time bubbles** have entered within range of our transmissions.”

“Tell them the name of the ship, and ask who they are,” Lexshue ordered.

“Roger.” The Goslauth proceeded to engage in **inter-bubble communication**.

“This is the **patrol ship** Goslauth. Please communicate the name of your ship and your affiliation.” After a frustratingly long interval, they finally received their reply.

The senior communications officer scanned the transmission pattern that appeared on the inner surface of the **space-time bubble** using her *froch*. “This... this isn’t a message. It’s an *agac izomhotr* (AHGA EEZOHOFT, signal of challenge)!”

“Then it’s settled,” Lexshue murmured. Her faint hopes that it was an allied fleet on the move due to some situation she wasn’t aware of now lay dashed. But the newfound certainty actually cleared her head.

“The **signal of challenge** won’t stop blaring. Will we respond?”

“No, ignore it. If they want to toy with us, then let them try their hardest to

catch up.”

While the signal continued ringing like a bloodthirsty war cry, the ten **bubbles** closed in ever nearer. The **bubbles** had been represented before as yellow blips, but were now red — confirmed enemies.

20:30.

“It is time, **Captain**,” Reiria informed her calmly.

“Okay.” Lexshue broadcast the following message to all crewmembers at all posts.

“Attention. This is your **Captain**. The unidentified **space-time bubbles** have made their hostility clear. We will be shifting to **Stage 1 War Preparations**. Now equip your **helmets** and assume your battle positions!” Her announcement was accompanied by an **alarm claxon**.

Before the captain’s seat, the *latonh* (LAHTOHNYUH, tactical control counter) slowly rose. Its screen displayed the *map of flat space*, but only at a limited range of distance, so the enemy hadn’t appeared on it yet. Lexshue inserted one of her circlet’s **access-cables** into the **control counter**.

In spite of their captain’s orders, not a single person on the bridge had put on their **pressurized helmets**. The **space-time bubble engine** beneath the bridge was securely protected by a shared spherical barrier. If the air-seal there were to be broken, it would spell the ship’s doom. In short, it was pointless to wear a pressurized helmet on the bridge, so there was an unwritten rule not to.

“Battle stationing complete for all hands,” reported **Vice-Captain** Reiria, who was monitoring the devices that displayed the state of the crew’s onboard deployment.

“Prepare for *hocsatiocss* (HOHKSAHTEEOHX, mine battle).” The **captain** wasted no time. “Load **mines** number 7 through 10 with *baich* (BEHSH, antimatter fuel).”

Satyth gor hoca (SAHTYOOTH GOR HOHKA, mobile space-time mines), or *hocsath* for short, were unmanned but equipped with their own **space-time bubble engines**. They were akin to miniature-scale **interstellar ships** in their own right. Their volume and mass were significant, and as such, not even a

gigantic patrol ship could house very many. The Goslauth could only hold 10, and numbers 1 through 6 had unfortunately already been used for practice exercises.

Their explosive impelling force derived from matter-antimatter annihilation. Since it was exceedingly dangerous to maintain the **antimatter fuel** if it was equipped on a continuous basis, they had made a habit of getting it supplied from a mother ship's *baicæcec* (BEKEK, fuel tank).

Supervisor and **Deca-commander** Gyrmryac ordered the fuel transferred to the deck containing the antimatter tanks. The antiprotons flowed into the mine deck, conducted by magnetic pipes. They allocated the **antimatter fuel** into magnetically confined containers of the four **mines** on deck.

"Loading of **antimatter fuel** complete," conveyed **Senior Gunner** and **Vanguard Starpilot** Sarrych.

The captain heard him loud and clear. "Fire the **mines**. Keep them within the **bubble** until the time is right."

The four **mines** were pitched. They settled into the same pocket of space-time as Goslauth, and began to slowly rotate.

21:30.

"Enemy **bubbles** have entered **mine** range," reported the **surveying communications officer**.

Sarrych looked up inquiringly at the Captain, but she shook her head wordlessly.

The ten **bubbles** pressed in even further, steadily assuming a battle formation encircling the Goslauth.

"A textbook attack formation," Lexshue remarked. "Generate the **bubbles** on the **mines**."

"Generating **bubbles** on **mines**," parroted the *tlaciac hocsathasairr* (TLAHKEEA HOHKSAHTHAHSEHR, mine gunner). After quickly working the controls, the mine gunner looked up and said, "Bubble generation confirmed!"

The enemy **bubbles** had already appeared on the **control counter**'s screen.

They were accompanied by red numbers.

“Aim the **mines**. 7 on 3, 8 on 1, 9 on 6, 10 on 7,” Lexshue commanded.

Ideally, they would land two mine blasts on each **space-time bubble**. In this situation, however, they had no such hopes.

“Inputting data.” The **mine gunner**’s voice raised the tension of the bridge. “Targets aligned.”

Lexshue switched her **circlet** to external-data mode. The data of the ship’s sensors flooded into her brain’s *rilbidoc* area. Her perception of the bridge disappeared as she focused her *frocragh*.

Lexshue was now at the center of a spherical space. The inner surface of their **bubble** whimpered with blotches of gray, the product of all the **space-time particle** collisions. It was pregnant with the stillness preceding a battle.

“Prepare for *dadiocss* (DAHDEEOHX, normal space battle). Fire up the **main engine system**.”

“Roger. Firing up **main engine system**,” repeated Gymryac.

The telltale rumble of antimatter and matter’s bitter quarrel rattled the ship. There were, however, many crewmembers who saw the vibrations as ominous.

“**Senior Gunner**, prepare the *irgymh* (EERGYOOF, electromagnetic cannons).”

“Roger. Preparing the **EM cannons**. “**Vanguard** Sarrych equipped his **control glove**. He was in charge of steering while within the **bubble**. He released the safety on the EM cannons and loaded their first volleys. “EM cannon preparations complete.”

The red blips had the blue blip, the Goslauth, completely encircled. They swooped in curved trajectories while closing the distance on their prey.

It really is right out of the drill manual, Lexshue thought with some admiration. It was clear to see that the enemy possessed a high level of proficiency. It was exceptionally difficult to maintain that clean formation while in **flat space**, where communication between units was tricky at best.

But her faith that her crew was not inferior when it came to skill was more than justified. While the Goslauth may have been commissioned a mere three

months prior, and one would be hard-pressed to claim that a sense of unity had formed in the crew, taken individually, they were all seasoned **soldiers**, each capable of satisfactorily carrying out their respective duties.

21:32.

Lexshue stood up from her chair and extracted the **command staff** from her **belt**. Then, the captain's seat sank into the floor. Using the **call-device** on her **control counter**, she addressed her entire crew.

"My dears, it's show time. I'm sure you were tired of waiting — *SAPORGAC!* (SAHPORGA, commence battle)" As soon as Lexshue puffed up her chest, the **alarm claxon** trilled through the air all across the ship.

She pointed the **command staff** at her **mine gunner**. "Detach all the **mines**."

"Detaching **mines**," said the gunner. "Number 7 undergoing *gor reutecothe* (GOR RYEUTKOHTH, space-time severance). Number 8, likewise. Number 9..."

Each mine **exited** her field of *frocragh* perception, one after the other. Four new blue blips shot out of the blue blip that represented the Goslauth. Each traced its own path of attack to a red blip.

"Number 8 undergoing *gor ptarhoth* (GOR PTARROHTH, space-time fusion)... Enemy **Bubble** Number 1, destroyed!" At the surveying communications officer's report, the bridge suddenly burst with emotion.

Though Lexshue had no way of knowing it, the ship hiding within **Bubble 1** was the United Humankind Peacekeeping Force's destroyer, the KEO3799. Captain Cartzen and the 23 other crew would go down as the first casualties of this lengthy war.

Bombs 7 and 10 also hit their marks, consigning two more enemy **bubbles** into oblivion. The space-time bubbles smashed up against the **space-time particles**, causing the fabric of **flat space** to undulate.

Number 9, however, missed its mark. The enemy **bubble** continued closing in as though nothing had happened.

"Turn 40 degrees right! We're going to ram Enemy 4!" she commanded the *rilbigac flactlochothasairr* (REELBEEGA FLAHTLOH'SHOHTHAH'SEHR, bubble-

steerer navigator) with her **command staff**.

The enemy, meanwhile, was fusing with their space-time from many different directions, seemingly determined to thrash the Goslauth in a group attack. The basic blueprint of battle involved faithfully executing on a solid strategy, but the Goslauth had no obligation to go along with that.

“Roger,” said the **navigator**. Around the stationary blue dot, the **flat space map** rapidly zoomed as red blip 4 charged toward them.

“They’re 100 *chéscédlairh* (SHESKEDLEHRR) away... 50 away...”

“Initiating space-time fusion, at position...”

The **captain’s frocragh** detected that part of the inner surface of their **bubble** had already begun to froth due to bombardment by a large number of **space-time particles**.

“Direct the ship’s bow into the point of fusion.” Lexshue thrust her **command staff** at the ominously frothing portion of the bubble’s inner barrier. That staff was pointing at what the devices on the bridge had detected, and after the **computing crystals** processed that information, it was beamed into Sarrych’s froch.

Now, the **senior gunner’s frocragh** sensed the external environment, just as the captain’s did. The command staff’s motions overlapped with that sensation, in a way that could be understood by the **vanguard starpilot**.

“As soon as we fuse, fire at will.”

“Roger.” But Sarrych’s voice had grown high-pitched.

“All hands, prepare for an **EM cannon** volley,” **Vice-Captain** Reiria advised.

The ship’s bow was pushed into the froth. “**Space-time fusion** underway!”

What they saw defied all expectation. A giant tunnel opened its maw within the quiet sphere of space. At the other end of it lay an alternate universe, and at its center lay an enemy warship. Its aim to destroy the Goslauth undisguised, it faced off against them.

The very second Lexshue realized there was a tunnel, the **EM cannons** were fired.

The Goslauth's main weapons, it sported four **EM cannons** in the front and two in the back.

All at once, the four front cannons fired *spytec* (SPYOOT, fusion warheads) accelerated all the way to 0.01 times the speed of light. Another volley followed soon after. The massive recoil overloaded the ship's **gravity control system**, and all the crew members that weren't fixed in place toppled forward.

Lexshue clasped onto the **control counter** and endured the tremors.

The eight **fusion warheads** jetted in unpredictable trajectories and dodged the enemy's defensive barrage to hurtle steadily onward. With the warheads' last attitude control, all the fuel they had left was fired through their backs, and they made their final bursts of acceleration flying toward their target from all directions.

The enemy also fired its *lunygh* (LOONYOOZH, antiproton cannon). However, the flow of antiprotons was shot from almost point-blank range, ricocheting pointlessly into space off the magnetic field the Goslauth had laid out.

The enemy ship exploded into smithereens, but they had no time to celebrate their victory.

"The enemy is fusing with this space-time — Ships 2, 5, 6..." The inner wall of the **space-time bubble** was already showing signs of entry from six different spots.

"Bow!" Lexshue thrust her **staff** at Enemy **Bubble 2**, having concluded it would be the first to arrive.

The ship's nose detached. An instant before space, merciless and full of enmity, opened its maw to usher in the enemy, a volley was launched at it. But they couldn't stop to check the results — they were already onto their next mark. Another enemy vessel was threatening to breach nearly right behind the patrol ship.

"Stern!" Lexshue thrust her **staff** over her shoulder. In order to slightly shift position, the Goslauth prepared its attitude and fired two fusillades from its twin back-cannons.

Despite having just broken through, Enemy **Bubble 6** immediately proceeded

to escape, detaching from their space-time.

In that moment, the first fusillade burst into their space-time. The second detonated within the patrol ship's bubble to no effect, but the enemy **bubble** dispersed as soon as it had fled.

To one of the ship's sides, Enemy **Bubble** 5 had completed fusion with their space-time. Neither the bow nor the stern could face it in time.

"Use the mobile cannons!" She thrust her **staff** to the side, so that they could mow it down.

The Goslauth was equipped with mobile *bhoclanh* (VOHCLAHNYUH, laser cannons) as well as **antiproton cannons**, controlled centrally from the bridge. The cannoneers aimed cannons both big and small and unleashed torrents of *clanragh* (CLAHNRAZH, lasers) and antiprotons at the enemy. These, however, were not furnished with the homing mechanisms of electromagnetically-propelled shells, and their accuracy rate was exceedingly low, to say nothing of their inferior firepower.

The enemy ship detached its four antimatter ballistic missiles and fired its **antiproton cannons**.

The missiles were not the problem. A missile that hadn't been accelerated beforehand lacked in speed, making it easy prey for the patrol ship's rounds of defensive fire. However, the **antiproton cannons** equipped on the enemy ship's bow were more potent than the Goslauth's mobile counterparts, and as such were capable of obliterating a giant vessel like it in the blink of an eye with a clean hit.

The enemy's torrent of antiprotons formed a clump and then surged toward the Goslauth. Though slowed by the Goslauth's *snæsaibec* (SNESEB, magnetic shield), the antiproton torrent pierced into its outer hull like it was *rÿabonn* (RYOOABOHN, crystal pottery). It instantly penetrated and boiled the water stored within the barrier walls. Then it reached the inner hull, composed of heavy metals, and devastated it. Meanwhile, the boiling water blew away part of the outer hull and the attitude control nozzle.

The Goslauth's **computing crystals** didn't need to wait for the direction of a **supervisor**; they detected the damage and switched the ship to a mode where

it could stay in control of its locomotion without that nozzle. Even so, the ship had lost most of its maneuverability.

The **space-time bubble**, agitated at multiple points, began to distort and curve in on itself. Within the writhing space, the battle was in a state of transition.

23:05.

“Enemy 10” was now a lump of plasma. Two ships remained.

The Goslauth was also wounded. Around half of its mobile cannons had been rendered silent, while many attitude control nozzles were damaged as well.

“Major damage on **Laser 3!**”

“Front Attitude Control Nozzle 3, incapacitated.”

“The **main engine system**’s power output, it’s...”

Unpleasant news was pouring in from everywhere. There was nary a second to rest for Gymryac, who had organized an emergency repair team and sent them to places where the damage could be seen to.

“Section 907 undergoing depressurization. No remaining crew there. Locking down.” Sweat glistened on the brow of Dich, the **clerk**, as well. There were more than 50 dead or missing. That was a significant portion of a **warship**’s crew of 220.

Lexshue kept her eyes closed and strained her *froch* to perceive what she could. Debris drifted all throughout their pocket of space. A vast number of broken-off fragments cluttered her senses. There were probably bodies amidst the cloud, though they were beyond saving. Any lifeboats sent to retrieve them would simply get shot down. Besides, their **uniforms** were too thin to protect them from the raging radioactive winds.

The two enemies flitted about, like a pair of butterflies, and spat their fell exhalations upon the Goslauth. Try though they did to hit them with the **EM cannons**, the painfully sluggish patrol ship was a sorrowful sight now. The enemy dodged their attacks with utter ease.

Of course, the mobile cannons never ceased hurling fire at them. Their **lasers**

broke through the outer hull of the enemy and sublimated its splintered pieces. The ionized hydrogen of the warship's driving flames piled on the resultant effluvium, and the particle density within its **space-time bubble** gradually decreased. Wandering protons and antiprotons collided, and transformed into electromagnetic waves. This microcosmos blazed like the beginnings of the *Drian* (DREEAHN, Big Bang).

It wasn't, however, a universe that held the spark of new life. It could give rise only to unadulterated *death*. Bare hatred clashed against bare hatred, and burst into ever greater slaughter.

They tried to get part of the enemy ship to fall into firing range of their back **EM cannons** by directing it there through their mobile cannons' firing line.

"Stern!" Lexshue alerted the **senior gunner**. They fired three volleys, almost as though they were venting their anger.

The heavy recoil kicked the patrol ship's massive bulk away. Behind them, a fireball.

Just one left! There was no doubt the **captain** was thinking what every member of her crew was.

But the last ship peppered them from the side with **antiproton cannon** fire. That would be a fatal blow.

"**EM shield**, down..." Gymryac gasped. Despair cascaded over the bridge.

"Don't give up now, my darlings!" she scolded them. "We're going to knock them out of our pocket of space. Bow!"

The Goslauth slowly began to change the direction of its bow. The ship was almost sputtering now, as though indignant it still couldn't catch a break.

"Focus mobile cannon fire on the enemy's right side. Full throttle ahead!"

However, the enemy ship was also shooting fiercely forward, its **antiproton cannon** fire unrelenting.

A flood of antiprotons that vastly outstripped what they'd been bathed in before the destruction of the **EM shield** rocked the Goslauth. The mobile cannon fire chipped at the enemy's outer hull, but they couldn't impede its

path.

At last, the streak of antiprotons penetrated through the Goslauth's outer hull, and then through its inner hull like a hot knife through butter, striking the **antimatter fuel** aboard. Its magnetic cage demolished, the freed antiprotons attacked the very matter the patrol ship was composed of.

23:27.

The Goslauth was now so much dust.

Jinto and Lafier knew nothing of its demise.

Though it was true that **mass-waves** permeated all of space, the **connecting vessel's** feeble equipment couldn't pick them up while the signals of the **gate** were interfering. That might have been a kindness to them. Though they weren't totally bereft of hope, the mood in that **steerer's room** was already very dark.

Jinto was sitting uncomfortably in his assistant steerer's seat.

Unlike the **small docking vessel** they'd ridden together before, a connecting vessel that sailed through **flat space** couldn't be piloted through just a **control glove**. That was why there were the controls that Jinto pictured when he thought 'spaceship' in front of the chairs. That being said, there was not much need in this sector, where **gates** were few and far between, to work the controls very frequently.

A sullen Lafier didn't speak a solitary word as she glowered at the screen displaying the **map of flat space**. Jinto stole a glance at the seat next to him and sighed surreptitiously.

Their **space-time bubble** was, as all others, a universe in itself. And its sole occupant, save for a modicum of floating particles, was the connecting vessel. Behind the seats of the steerer's room lay a *iadbel* (YAHDBEHL, air lock room), as well as a washroom and nap room. That was the entire living space entrusted to what, in their universe, amounted to all of humanity.

We're the only ones in the universe...

And half of the universe's intelligent life had sunk into a profound

melancholy. The other half was not exactly feeling chipper, either, but he did feel like this universe could do with at least a little cheer.

“Uhh... Lafier...” Jinto tried to start a conversation.

Lafier raised her head. There was no way he could guess what she was thinking about from her expression.

“You’re the **Viscountess of Parhynh**, right?”

“That’s right.”

“I wanted to ask you about your **fief**. What’s the *Bærscorh Parhynr* (BERSKOHR PARRYOON, Viscountdom of Parhynh) like? Given that ‘Parhynh’ means ‘Land of the Rose,’ I assume there are a lot of roses?”

“No.” While hardly enthusiastic, Lafier didn’t rebuff his efforts. “There aren’t even any lichens, let alone roses. There aren’t so much as microbes on any planet out there.”

“Then why’s it called the Land of the Rose?”

“The man in charge of surveying it had a soft spot for flowers, and basically just felt like going around naming them after various kinds. ‘Gyrhynh’ (GYIRYOONYUH, Land of the Lily), ‘Spaichynh’ (SPESHYOONYUH Land of the Camellia), all sorts. That’s all there is to it.”

“Huh. All right then, what’s it like?”

“There isn’t much to say. It’s a system with a yellow star and seven planets. The second planet could be human-habitable with some work. I think I’d like to fiddle around with that planet once I’m free of my duties as an *imperial*. I want to make the whole surface of Parhynh bloom with its namesake roses.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“I like to think so.”

And with that, the curtain of silence was drawn once again. Jinto racked his mind once again. How could he beat this acrid silence? But it was Lafier who broke it.

“Jinto.”

“Yeah?”

“You have my gratitude.”

“For what?”

“You’re thinking of me, aren’t you? I can’t say the way you’re doing so is terribly sophisticated, but it’s heartening nonetheless.”

“Well, I’m sorry I’m so awkward.” Jinto was simultaneously miffed and relieved.

“Don’t be angry,” Lafier smiled. “I’m trying to thank you.”

“Me? Angry?”

“I...” Lafier stared at the screen again. “I hate it, Jinto. When the all-important time came, I was totally useless.”

“Way to hurt a guy’s feelings,” murmured Jinto.

“Huh?” She cast a doubtful glance his way.

“You’re not ‘useless’ — you’re saving me. If you weren’t here, I’d be lost. But I guess my life in your hands isn’t enough to satisfy your lofty sense of obligation.”

“...You’re right. Forgive me.”

“Besides, I’m sure the ship’ll come out okay,” Jinto asserted groundlessly.

“...Yes... Yes, I’m sure, too,” she mumbled, but more to convince herself than anything else.

“Hey, Jinto.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you remember my birth-secret story?”

“Course.” Jinto was mystified as to why that, of all things, had been brought up again.

“Don’t tell anybody what I’m about to tell you...”

“Nice, I love secrets,” he said as cheerily as possible so as to improve her mood.

“My **gene donor** is the **captain**.”

“What?” Jinto thought he might have misheard her.

“But that would make **Hecto-commander** Lexshue... your mother?”

“No, she’s not my ‘mother.’ She’s my **gene donor**.”

“Sorry, I’m still thinking like a Lander, forget I said that,” he said. “But... but she didn’t really *feel* like she was related to you.”

Or did she? The **captain** *had* called her, her “dear Highness.” He had felt something there that transcended the surface-level superior-subordinate relationship.

“What do you think the **Star Forces** are? It doesn’t matter that she’s an old acquaintance. It only matters when we’re alone together.”

“Yeesh, sounds so complicated. Like... Wow, though...”

“I felt proud to know *Cya Placiäc* (KYOOA PLAHKEEA, Lady Plakia)... I’ve known the **captain** since I was little, so I’ve always respected her. I’m proud that half of me comes from her. I was a **daughter of love**. She was my father’s *iömh* (YOHF, lover). I always suspected it... wanted it to be true...”

“If you’ve known her for so long, couldn’t you have just asked?” Jinto was almost dumbfounded, despite himself, at just how thoroughly blood and family were separate in Abh custom.

“I already told you. I wasn’t an adult yet, so without my father’s permission, I —”

“No, I mean, why didn’t you ask her? You know, directly?” Lafier opened her eyes wide and stared fixedly at Jinto, who suddenly felt uneasy. “Did I say something stupid?”

She nodded vigorously. “Incredibly.”

“Oh? All right, I’ll bite — is asking her directly really that unthinkable?”

“There’s such a thing as *manners*.”

“Uh huh... So it’s rude to ask a **gene donor** if they’re your gene donor?”

“It’s extremely embarrassing, Jinto.”

“I see.” Jinto crossed his arms and chewed it over... *Nope. Don’t get it.*

“Why’s it embarrassing?”

“It needs a reason to be embarrassing? Things that are embarrassing just are.”

Well, now that she mentions it, I guess that’s true... Jinto forced himself to go with it. After all, asking someone “Are you my mom?” would take quite some courage even according to his own non-Abh sensibilities.

“Even if I had asked, she wouldn’t have answered me. The only one who can tell a child about their *dairlach* (DEHRLAHS, genetic information) is their parent.”

“And that’s good manners, too?”

“Yes, that’s good manners.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“I don’t think it is.”

“I’d love it if I could take you to my home planet one day and have you live there for a handful of years. Then the meaning of the word ‘complicated’ might come to light.”

“Okay. Once my responsibilities as an **imperial** are behind me, I wouldn’t mind letting you take me there,” Lafier said, her voice a bit livelier now.

“It’ll be my pleasure.” But Jinto had remembered a bitter truth.

You’ve forgotten, Lafier. When that time comes, you’ll have aged only ten years. You’ll still look young and beautiful. I, on the other hand, will be either stupidly old or already dead...

“But couldn’t you have asked her if she was your father’s... I mean, *Fiac Lartr Cryb*’s **lover**? Is that rude, too?”

“Of course it is.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. Is this ‘complicated’ to you as well?”

“Very,” Jinto assured her. “Who told you that the **Hecto-commander** is Fiac Lartr Cryb’s lover, then?”

“No one had to tell me. It was obvious. The **captain** was always visiting at the *lartbéic* (LARBAY, royal palace).”

“Sounds complicated.”

“I’m tired of hearing you say that, Jinto. It’s annoying.”

He shrugged. “Don’t worry about it.”

Lafier looked at him like she wanted to say something, but she returned to eyeing the screen. “My genetics aside, I love **Lady Plakia**. She was already worthy of respect even at the **palace**, but I gained even more for her aboard ship. The other **starpilots** and **NCCs** did, too. There were some I didn’t like very much, but I hope they’re all okay...” Lafier hung her head as though in prayer.

“Yeah.” Jinto recalled all the people with whom he’d conversed on the patrol ship. It had only been five days, but in that time, he’d met nothing but good-natured folks. His preconception of the Abh as cruel invaders was completely turned on its head. At the very least, he had no reason to wish them dead.

Lafier remained motionless for a little while. The sensation that she was drowning at the bottom of the ocean, that Jinto been trying to dispel, came roaring back. This time around, there was just nothing Jinto could say. He stared at the steering controls vacantly.

Finally, Lafier raised her head. “Jinto. Could you tell me about your home?”

“Ah, sure, no problem.” Jinto was relieved. “Where should I start? Unlike your **fief**, there’s plenty to talk about...”

Jinto suddenly realized he’d been unconsciously fidgeting with the imitation jewel on his chest. The creature engraved on it was that furriest of fish, the *rezwan*. He decided to lead with all the details about the *rezwan*’s absolutely wretched diet.

Over the next two days, apart from their alternating sleeping shifts, Jinto spent nearly the entire time filling her in on the lifeforms of Martinh, though much of it was only vaguely recalled and much of it was outright fabrication on

his part. And, to his surprise, he'd succeeded in making Lafier laugh quite a few times.

After their two days on the connecting vessel, the pair arrived at the *Lymscorh Faibdacr* (LYOOMSCORR FEBDAHK, Febdash Barony).

Chapter 8: The Lymscorh Faibdacr (LYOOMSCORR FEBDAHK, Febdash Barony) The Febdash Barony comprised a blue star and two gas planets, along with countless rock fragments. Even the Empire's very best terraforming technology couldn't make an inhabitable planet out of them, and they didn't have the resources to lug that technology through flat space just for a collection of rocks. It was even emptier than the Viscountdom of Parhynh. But the *lymeghéc* (LYOOMZHEH, baron's household) made sure it wrung revenue from this *scorh* (SCORR, domain).

There was an enterprise one needs only a star to conduct, involving a stable commodity that was always in demand. They manufactured **antimatter fuel**.

It was considered theoretically impossible to turn matter inside out into antimatter. If one wanted antimatter, they had to rely on an antique method from the dawn of engineering, of civilization. A sun's radiation was stored in solar batteries, and the energy was then pumped into a linear particle accelerator to speed up elementary particles. When accelerated elementary particles smashed into each other, the energy their collision emitted condensed, with pair production as its result — matter, and antimatter.

Like other resourceless planets, many *iodh* (YOHDTH, antimatter fuel factories) were in operation in the **barony**. Myriad disks orbited close to the star Febdash. Those were the **antimatter fuel factories**. Their disks, facing the

sun, were loaded with solar batteries, and behind them, sixteen linear particle accelerators were radially aligned. The batteries drank in the heat and light emitted by the star, which was subsequently channeled by the accelerators and reborn as protons and antiprotons within the centers of the disks.

Only the antiprotons among them were collected. The protons were allowed to leak away into space. It was far more economically viable to transport protons from gas planets than to install separate proton capture traps.

The antiprotons, so amassed, were harvested into containers connected to the **antimatter fuel factories**. Once a container became full, it turned into an independent asteroid orbiting the cluster of factories so that in the unlikely case an incident occurred, the factories wouldn't get destroyed.

The *Lymécth Faibdacr* (LYOOMEKTH FEBDAHK, Estate of the Febdash Barony) revolved even farther from its sun than the *sombec baicæcer* (SOHB BEKEKAR, antimatter storage asteroids). There was also the **Febdash Gate**, married as it was to the baron's mansion.

The **connecting vessel** entered **normal space** through this **gate**.

"Show me video of the outside, if you could," asked Jinto.

"Sure." She made a complex grasping motion with the **control glove**, and the walls of the **steerer's room** filled with the stars innumerable.

"I never imagined the stars could be such a sight for sore eyes," Jinto said sincerely. The inner wall of the **space-time bubble** was a gloomy grey. Compared to that, the twinkling stars had a congenial familiarity to them. He now understood, if only a little, why the Abh called themselves the **Kin of the Stars** and the cosmos their home.

"We still have a long way to go, Jinto," said Lafier ruthlessly.

"We're going straight back into **flat space** after resupplying."

"Can we take a break while resupplying?" asked Jinto hopefully.

"A break? You're not doing anything to begin with."

"Thanks for reminding me. But I'll have you know I'm overseeing all the controls while you're sleeping," he quipped.

“You woke me up whenever anything happened.”

“I haven’t woken you up. Nothing ever happened.”

“Yes, thanks to me and my **computing crystals**.”

“Fine, fine.” Jinto dropped it. While it was true that Jinto wasn’t doing — *couldn’t* do — much of anything, the connecting vessel’s operations were being taken care of by its autopilot. He had never actually seen Lafier steering it.

Compared to that, Jinto brooded inwardly, I was the real workhorse, what with all that talking.

Lafier called up **Flight Control**.

“This is the patrol ship Goslauth’s **connecting vessel**. Febdash Barony Flight Control, please respond.” Her screen switched from displaying the map of the star system to video of a Lander woman.

“This is Febdash Barony Flight Control.”

“This is the patrol ship Goslauth’s **connecting vessel**. Requesting fuel resupply.”

“The patrol ship Goslauth’s **connecting vessel**?” The **Flight Control officer** appeared puzzled. It must have seemed strange for a giant ship’s smaller vessel to be requesting fuel by itself. Even so, the officer nodded.

“Roger that, Goslauth **connecting vessel**. You are welcome within. Please choose your method of resupply.”

“This is a *ménh sona* (MENYUH SOHNA, light vessel), so I’d like to resupply at the **pier**.”

“Roger. Please transmit desired amount of fuel.”

“Roger.” After finishing the transmission protocol, she told Jinto: “If we resupply at the **pier**, we can take a break. We can likely even take a hot bath.”

“Awesome!” said Jinto. “A nice bath isn’t a bad idea, especially considering you’re probably the smelliest **royal princess** in the galaxy at the moment.”

“What’s that I see...?” Lafier’s squinted her big, beautiful eyes at him. “Oh, it’s someone who clearly yearns for death. I’d be more than happy to oblige.”

“C’mon, I was just kidding.” Jinto was shaken by the light in the princess’s raven-black eyes. “You don’t smell that much, I swear.”

“‘That much’?” Lafier’s eyes narrowed even more.

“No, I mean, you don’t smell at all!” he back-pedaled immediately. And indeed, that was the closest he’d arrived to the actual truth of the matter. “What impudent rube would ever so much as imply that you smelled even a little!?”

“You must have noticed by now, Jinto, that sometimes your ‘jokes’ irritate more than they amuse.”

“Yeah, but then I forget soon after. It’s an issue.”

Lafier brought a sleeve to her nose and took a whiff. Her face contorted. “I suppose your remarks have a kernel of truth.”

To that, Jinto knew to be cautious and keep his mouth shut.

“On the other hand, I can’t say *you’re* particularly pristine, either.”

“Guess not, huh. But I bet if you searched the **Empire**, you could turn up a couple or more **heirs to countdoms** stinkier than me right now. There are way more of us out there than there are **royal princesses**.”

Lafier opened her mouth to retort, but the **Flight Control officer** on screen cut in.

“**Pier** resupply approved, Goslauth **connecting vessel**. All clear. Please make your way to the pier immedi—”

The officer paused halfway. She, too, now squinted, questioningly. Suddenly, she opened her eyes wide, and murmured: “*Fiac Lartnér* (Royal Princess)...”

It seemed the identity of the steerer before her had her in shock. Deeply, she bowed her head.

Guess they know of Lafier even all the way out here, thought Jinto. I must look like a big goof by comparison.

“Are we still cleared to enter the pier?” pressed Lafier.

“Yes, of course, by all means. You may proceed. Yes.”

Guided by the information entered by the clearly nervous **controller**, the vessel drew nearer to the **Baron's estate**.

"**Febdash Flight Control Center**, there's something I must apprise you of..." During their approach, Lafier summarized the intrusion of what was all too likely an enemy fleet into **Empire** territory.

"That's..." But the officer was at a loss for words. It took her a brief spell to pull herself back together: "I must relay this to *far simh* (FAR SEEF, my noble)."

"Of course; please do so."

The scenery tinged by the star Febdash's blue flames, the **Baron's estate's** details came into sharp relief.

Many older **orbital estates** were shaped like rings in order to simulate gravity through constant rotation. That style of architecture, however, couldn't get around how the levels of "gravity" and rotational speed varied by stratum. Due to that, the more recent **orbital estates** — which is to say, those of the past 300 years — were, as a rule, equipped with their own **gravity control systems**. They came with equipment installation and maintenance costs, but they were generally worth it for the higher quality of life.

This **estate** was the type that had a **gravity control system**. It was shaped like an inclined hexagon. Its long arm propped up a cubical structure, which was the **spaceport**. Because it stored the **antimatter fuel** for *paunh* (POHNYUH, transport ships), the spaceport was usually installed at a comfortable distance from the estate's main structure. In addition to the prow portion of a giant *casobiac bendér* (CAHSOHBEEA BENDEHR, hydrogen carrier), a number of small intra-system spaceships were docked at the pier like a bunch of gnats.

The artificial gravity enveloping the estate took action. The spherical steerer's room rotated; the ceiling of the steerer's room, which faced its bow, now turned away from the estate. Jinto saw a red "17" sign beneath his feet. Pier 17 was reserved for **connecting vessels** like theirs.

They docked. The footage of the outside cut out, reverting the walls around them to their typical milky white color. The green glyphs rolling across the screen communicated to the *loc* (LOH, pressure door) that the connected tube had been attached.

“Let’s go, Jinto.” Lafiel removed her equipment and stood up.

“Right.” Jinto stood up with her. “How long will we be able to stay for?”

“For about thirty minutes.”

“That’s it?” he frowned. Washing up would be all he could do in that time. Of course, he was grateful nonetheless.

“We need to get to Sfagnoff as quickly as possible.”

“I know.” Jinto followed her into the **air lock room**. “But how much earlier can we get there than the enemy fleet?”

“What, you don’t know?” she said in a disdainful tone. “We’ll get there around 27 hours before them, by Sfagnoff time.”

“In that case, we’ve got enough time to kick back...” But Jinto took note of her furrowed brow. “...is what I *would* say if I didn’t agree that we need to warn Sfagnoff of the danger with all haste.”

“I thank you for not forgetting that,” she replied sharply.

They stood atop the **air lock room**. It was blocked off by the *férétcaucec* (FEHRETKOHK, elevator ramp). “Descend,” she commanded of it.

Dropping down through the translucent connection tube, the two stepped foot into the **Baron’s estate**. It was the first gravity he’d experienced in two days, so he felt dizzy as he scanned around.

The skies were starry. With Febdash’s shining blue sun nowhere in sight, it was clear this wasn’t footage of the outside. There was another giveaway — the countless fish swimming among those stars.

Ten-odd Landers were standing in a row in front of the connecting tube’s entryway. They were the *gosucec* (GOHSOOK, servants) of the *lymh* (LYOOF, baron). They made a strange impression on him. Then it dawned on him why — they were all women.

The women bowed their heads. “*Fiac Lartnér...*” One of their number walked forward toward them, as reverentially as ever. It was the **Flight Control officer** from before. She kept her gaze away from the face of the **Empress’s** granddaughter, as though looking directly at it would invite destiny’s wrath

upon her. “If you would be so kind as to enter our humble abode, I would be delighted to guide you to the restroom.”

“We would like that very much. However...” Lafier’s tone turned stiff. “I’m just an **apprentice starpilot** of the **Star Forces** at present, and I ask that you treat me as such.”

“Yes, Ma’am. We will accommodate your request. Now kindly come this way, *Fiac Lartnér...*” Lafier sighed and let it pass.

“Is it always like this for you?” Jinto whispered.

“Come off it!” she hissed in reply.

They were escorted to a room within the spaceport’s facilities. It contained several tables, and the surroundings here were the same array of twinkling stars and wandering fish. There was nobody else there.

Lafier was led to the seat at the very back. Jinto assumed he ought to sit next to her at her table, but the **officer** gestured for him not to.

“Please, Sir, if you could seat yourself over there instead...”

“Huh?” Jinto blinked, confused. “How come?”

She chewed over her words, reluctant to answer why. Her diffident eyes drifted away from Jinto’s own. He was quite used to this reaction from people. The combination of his brown hair and his **noble’s circlet** was throwing her for loops. And it was more than evident that she believed a boy of clearly Lander genetics should not be sitting at the same table as a relative of the exalted **Empress**.

“Jinto!” shouted Lafier, as though something in her snapped. “What are you doing? Just sit down already.”

“I intend to.” Jinto was just as ticked off, and he ignored the officer.

The officer furrowed her brow, but made no attempt to defy the **royal princess**. “What would you like to drink?”

“Never mind drinks,” said Lafier. “I want to make use of your *chicrh guzaser* (SHEER GOOZAHSAR, shower room). Could you take us there?”

“A member of the **imperial family**, asking for the **shower room**!” The **officer**’s eyes opened wide. “We have a *gobh* (GOHV, lavatory), which would be far more becoming. If I could but request you wait a short while—”

“We have no time, *gosucec*-rann. Besides, I can assure you that **imperials** use regular old **shower rooms** all the time.”

“Is that so...?” The officer was befuddled. “I’m afraid I don’t have the authority to answer. What would you like to drink?”

Lafier gave in to her tenacity, and glanced at Jinto.

“Give me **coffee** or somesuch. Make it cold,” said Jinto. He wasn’t actually thirsty; he just thought he ought to ask for something.

“Fetch me some *tirec nomr* (TEER NOHM, peach juice). Make it hot, and add a slice of *ropec* (ROHP, lemon).”

“I see you have *unique* tastes, Lafier,” he quipped casually, but then he noticed the officer giving him a hell of a glare. He gave a slight shrug.

“Yes, Ma’am. I will bring Your Highness some **peach juice**. Please wait a moment.” The officer wiped the look from her face, bowed deeply, drew away.

“And could you not forget my **coffee** while you’re at it...” mumbled Jinto. He couldn’t help but feel she hadn’t listened to a word he’d said from the start.

“I don’t think I’ll ever take to this whole atmosphere,” said Lafier.

“Right there with you.” Compared to the members of the **imperial family**, **nobles** were perhaps not that much of a rarity after all. That said, he now found being ignored rather fun. After all, it wasn’t as though he wanted to go around affecting the supercilious aristocrat. What he did want — and it was a modest desire — was for his presence to be acknowledged.

At last, the **Flight Control officer** came back with another lady and an **automaton** in tow. The **automaton** came to a halt by Jinto’s side.

“Here you are.” The officer gazed at Jinto with icy eyes.

“Thanks.” As Jinto inwardly murmured his gratitude that they hadn’t overlooked him, he retrieved the container of chilled coffee from the **automaton**’s abdomen.

The other lady lowered the cup of peach juice she'd been holding reverently. It was obvious she was extremely nervous. Her fingers were trembling, the peach juice sloshing.

Then, it spilled over the brim. Not a large amount, mind. A single drop of juice touched the table.

And yet, the two flew into such a panic, one would think they'd just splashed the **royal princess's** head with boiling water.

"Seelnay (SELL'NYE), wha-what have you done!?" The flight controller's face turned pale.

"M-my apologies!" Her tone was so apologetic, in fact, that one wouldn't be surprised if she'd started rubbing the floor with her forehead.

Jinto was horrified. What was there to get so upset about? So an infinitesimally tiny amount of peach juice had been spilled — so what?

Lafier was also stupefied. "What's the matter?"

"I've spilled the drink I was to offer you, *Fiac Lartnér*. Wha-what ought I to do now... I beg your forgiveness..."

"My forgiveness? For this?" Lafier looked blankly at the mere drops on the table. "There's nothing to forgive." When she wiped it with her finger, Seelnay gasped.

"Augh! Please, this is beneath you! I, I'll wipe it clean, so please, you needn't deign to—"

"Worry not." Lafier lowered her hand, as though to hide the wet finger that Seelnay was nigh threatening to cling to. "I don't know how you picture a **royal palace** upbringing, but I can dry my own finger."

"I'm certain you can, but..." Seelnay was near to bursting into tears.

Lafier looked at Jinto with pleading eyes: *save me*.

"Uhhh..." Jinto interjected. "I think if you don't drop it, then it'd **become** something to apologize over."

"Y-Yes." Seelnay bowed while biting her lip.

“See, even *Fiac Lartnér* says so, Seelnay,” said the **controller**. “Let’s excuse ourselves for a moment.”

“Yes.” Her shoulders shuddered slightly as she bowed deeply once again.

Lafier waited until they’d vacated. “I’m liking this less and less.”

“That blew my mind. Are all **imperial citizens** like that? It was like they were afraid of something. And I thought the **NCCs** on the Goslauth seemed a lot *tougher*...” Jinto may have been a **noble**, but he was a Lander genetically, and he was not amused at how servile his fellow Landers appeared to be.

“They’re not like them. All the *NCCs* on the Goslauth are of sound character.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” He didn’t. It had been Lafier who’d told him that within the military, one’s family ties didn’t matter. There was a high probability that the **Star Forces** were an exception.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Lafier looked surprised. “I speak only truth. You’ll see once we reach the **Capital**. I don’t tell lies that’ll be exposed so quickly.”

“Uh huh.”

“I’ve even been scolded by an **imperial citizen** when I was a child.” Lafier got serious.

“Did they not know you were a **royal princess**?”

“No, they weren’t like *you*! That **citizen** was working at my home. Trust me, they knew.”

“Your home, as in the Crybh Kingdom?”

“Yes. It was a gardener who worked for **royals**. I’d made the *ïazriac* (YAHZREEA, portable podium) rush around the dining hall with abandon, and ended up ruining a shrubbery patch.”

“Your stories are difficult to follow sometimes, you know that? A shrubbery patch in the dining hall? Don’t you mean right outside the dining hall?”

“No, it was a dining garden.”

“Ohhh.” Jinto remembered now: Abh dwellings were usually within artificial

environments. For example, the resident could summon rain when and where desired. Since there was no distinction between indoors and outdoors, a flower bed and a sleeping bed could lie side-by side. A shrubbery patch in a dining space was nothing to question.

Lafier resumed telling her story: The gardener surveyed the disaster zone with grieving eyes, but maintained his courteous demeanor as he spoke his mind to the petrified **princess**. He told her that he took immense pride in his work. That the artistry of the whole garden hinged on the patch that now lay in disarray. That he felt a great deal of shock and dismay over how it had been mangled by the prank of a seven-year-old girl. That humanity had not yet invented a way to quell the level of resentment seething within him.

By the time he was done berating her, Lafier was beside herself, apologizing profusely while her lips trembled. She pledged never to perpetrate such a fatuous deed again — though of course, through the vocabulary of a seven-year-old.

The gardener did not hold any stock in Lafier's vow. Naturally his perfect courteousness never faltered, yet he intimated: "If your Highness's **portable podium** should ever damage my creations again, I shall make sure you spend some quality time building an intimate relationship with my soil-enriching earthworms!" And only once he'd impressed this on her did he let her go.

"Needless to say, afterward, my father scolded me as well. He said, 'If you think your life is valueless enough to trade for a moment's play, then have at it. But don't you ever think so lowly of another person's pride.'"

"I get you, but maybe that gardener was just a special case," said Jinto, still doubtful.

"He wasn't! The **servants** of both Crybh and of the other nobles I know all take pride in their work. They're all that dignified and high-minded."

"All right, I believe you." She'd convinced him. "Those two seem *really* prideful when it comes to me."

"They're ignoring you."

"Thanks for telling me, but I think I noticed."

“In any case, I don’t like this place. I think it may be best to forgo the bath and leave...”

Just then, the wall by their table shifted. A square “window” opened in the video of stars and fish, showing the image of a man.

He was Abh. His hair was blue, but a faint blue with a golden gloss. His eyes were almond-shaped, and his mouth stuck in a slight sneer.

“Please forgive the interruption,” came his salutations. “If I’m not mistaken, you must be *Lartiéc Crybr, Fiäc Lamhirh*.”

“I am indeed *Abliarsec néic-Dubreuscr, Bærh Parhynr Lamhirh*,” said Lafier.

“My name is *Atausryac ssynéc-Atausr, Lymh Faibdacr Clüarh* (KLOWAR, Baron of Febdash). It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise, **Baron**.” Lafier nodded, then pointed at Jinto. “This is *Linn ssynec-Rocr İarlucec Dreur Haider Ghintec-lonh*.”

“Nice to meet you, lonh-*Lymh*,” said Jinto, bowing lightly.

“My humblest greetings to you as well, lonh-*iarlucer Dreur*.” But the Baron’s interest in Jinto evaporated once he’d gone through the obligatory courtesies. “Now then, *Fiäc Lartnér*, there’s something I truly regret to inform you.”

“What?” she asked warily.

“I’m afraid that due to some distressing ineptitude on our end, it has come to light that we currently lack the fuel you require.”

“But that can’t be! Your **Flight Control officer** clearly said...”

“That’s where the aforementioned distressing ineptitude comes in. It was her oversight. And I can only offer my sincerest apologies.”

“I understand. In that case, we’ll just resupply directly at an **antimatter fuel storage asteroid**.”

“Oh, bless your heart,” the **Baron of Febdash** chuckled. Jinto didn’t know why, but he shuddered.

“**Your Highness**, in your graciousness you’ve only just come to my doorstep,” the Baron continued. “It would shame the name of the *Lyumjhe Faibdacr*

(LYOOMYEH FEBDAHK, Febdash Baron's household) to see you off in such a state. By hook or by crook, I simply *must* show you around my **orbital estate**, squalid though it may be."

"Though I appreciate the generous invitation," Lafier scowled, "I have been pressed to a military mission, and have no time for leisure. Have you not heard our circumstances? If not, kindly have your **servants** relay to you what I told them. I am not here on a courtesy call, **Baron**."

"I have heard, *Fiac*. We would be eternally grateful if you would suffer our cordial welcome nonetheless."

"I thank you for the offer. However..." It was plain to see that Lafier was feeling nothing close to gratitude; she was beginning to get very annoyed indeed. "...If you know of our situation, then you should understand that your warm reception is the last thing we need. I believe you should be working out how to get us off your **domain** instead."

"We're sorry to have troubled you, but we don't have any **vessels** you could use. There's just nothing to be done."

"I see. But—"

The Baron cut in. "Please listen, Your Highness. The closest full **fuel asteroids** are in an orbit quite far from here. The only bodies that are orbiting in the vicinity are small, barren asteroids."

"But how is that possible...?"

"Do you doubt my words, *Fiac*?" said the Baron, throwing her a hard look. "I'm the one who knows the most about my own territory."

"Forgive me," she pled sincerely. "We must however leave for that asteroid, however far it may be."

"There's no need to go out of your way. I am accelerating the asteroids. In about twelve hours, they'll be much closer."

"Twelve hours..."

"So I hope you understand now, *Fiac*, why I would like it if you could make yourself at home in this mansion of mine. I ask you at least take this time to

bathe and partake of the modest meal we can provide you. I too have served in the military, and as such I know what it's like inside a **connecting vessel**. It pains me to think that a member of the **imperial family** has had to spend a significant amount of time inside one of those dreadfully cramped things."

"I'm not 'an **imperial**' at the moment," Lafier reminded him. "I am requesting you provide me with fuel as a **Star Forces soldier**."

"Then as the **lord** of this territory, I request more details of the **Star Forces**. I do have that right."

"Ah." He'd hit her in a blind spot. "You are correct, **Baron**. It had slipped my notice. There's a Goslauth navigation logbook aboard ship, so I'll send you a copy of the sections you need."

"That would be lovely, but I shall examine it at the dinner table," the Baron replied, though begrudgingly.

Jinto, who had been listening from the side, felt ill at ease all the while. Was this how the upper classes of the **Empire** spoke to each other? It was like the universe's most refined bickering match. Lafier's tone of speech turned far more formal and ceremonious than when she conversed with Jinto.

She argued her case relentlessly. "I still think that if we headed out in our **vessel** now, we would get there faster. As soon as I hand you the copy of the logbook, we would like to make for the nearest **fuel asteroid**."

"You would get there faster if you left now, yes," said the **Baron**. "However, I've received reports that Your Highness's **connecting vessel** needs a bit of *inspection*. So, no matter what, you wouldn't be able to leave immediately."

"Inspection? What part?"

"I haven't heard the particulars. Please ask the one in charge of that. Though that engineer is busy working on it, so you shall have to ask after you take some relaxation." The Baron did not let her get a word in edgewise about it. "Now I will be having my **servants** be your guides, so I humbly bid you wait here."

The video cut out. Lafier didn't take her eyes off that space on the wall. "He ignored you, too."

Indeed, the only reason he'd even spared him any words of greeting was because Lafier introduced him. After that, he might as well have not been there. "Oh well. Can't be helped. I'm just a **noble** next to an **imperial**. It's only natural he'd fuss over you more."

"If he really wanted to give us a 'cordial welcome,' he would have included you. Am I wrong? Or is this 'complicated' to you, too?"

"Oh, it ain't complicated." Jinto turned the conversation with the Baron over in his mind. He'd been having a listen with the mindset of an outside observer, so it hadn't bothered him, but it was true that the **Baron** had acted fairly rudely toward him. Sadly, however, Jinto was used to being snubbed, so he couldn't really muster any anger over it. "I'm just happy you got pissed on my behalf."

"I'm not *angry on your behalf*."

"Oh." Jinto took a sip of his coffee.

"I'm saying that that attitude means he can't be trusted. They're inspecting the **vessel**? It sounds like a big ruse. I'm sorry to say it, but it's difficult to believe that such a small **domain** even has the technology. I think he may be trying to stall us."

"Why, though? I wouldn't get too paranoid if I were you, Lafier."

"But he's so unbearable."

"Well, I'm with you there..." Jinto folded his arms.

He couldn't argue with that. In fact, the Baron was the type who didn't even need to open his mouth for one to instinctually dislike him. That aversion to his character wasn't nearly strong enough to be characterized as "hate," per se, but it did fill him with misgivings regarding the prospect of getting to know the man. If the first Abh he ever met had been the Baron of Febdash instead of Lafier or Lexshue, he probably wouldn't have ever warmed up to the Abh as a whole. But there was always the possibility that the Baron was some pitiful sap who was just too awkward at making good first impressions.

"Let's think about it logically. Let's suppose that the **honorable Baron** has some ulterior motive. What could that motive be? What's in it for him to draw us into his estate?"

Lafier could only cock her head. She looked just as clueless as him.

Jinto took a stab at it. “Maybe he wants the **vessel**?”

“But why?” The **princess** looked up.

“Why, you ask? Isn’t it obvious? To flee the enemy fleet.”

“That **vessel** only seats two people.”

“Yeah, which would be more than enough for him to escape by his lonesome.”

“And abandon his **servants**?”

“So you don’t trust the **Baron** overall, but you do trust in his sense of justice?

“Don’t be such an *onh* (OHNYUH, idiot)! It has nothing to do with his own ethics. To abandon his **servants** and the **citizens of his territory** would be the greatest shame he could ever incur as a **noble**. He would be judged for that under **imperial law**, to say nothing of hijacking a ship. He’d be better off in a UH prison camp than face the destiny that would await him in the **Empire**.”

“I see what you’re saying. His **noble rank** saddles him with *selæmeco*th (SELEHMKOHTH, obligations).”

“Yes. Exactly,” she nodded.

But Jinto wasn’t ready to shelve his conjecture just yet. “Though you know, when people come to their wit’s end, they don’t exactly act all that rationally. Back when I was in Vorlash, there was this high-rise that’d caught fire, and I saw a bunch of folks jump from the 35th floor. Sure, they must’ve thought that dying that way was preferable to burning alive, but it made me think, man, that’s the one way I never want to go. Maybe our **Baron** here’s about to jump out the 35th floor, mentally?”

“Did he look like he was at his wit’s end to you?”

“I mean, no, not really...” Then he grinned. “But that just proves he can’t be plotting something, then.”

“I suppose not,” she admitted reluctantly.

“I say we accept his warm welcome. I shall join in partaking of dinner.”

Jinto glanced to the side, and spotted the Baron's **servants** walking their way.

Chapter 9: The *Bar Ébhoth* (BAR EVOHTH, Smile of the Abh) The bath did hit the spot. Upon steeping herself in the hot brimming water, Lafier could feel her fatigue roll away as surely as all her sweat. The wariness in her heart, however, proved harder to wash away.

Part of the reason lay in her attendant.

She couldn't fathom why, but that "Seelnay" woman had entered the **lavatory** with her, offering to wait on her by washing her hair, scrubbing her back, and all manner of other things. That must have been her mistaken picture of the **imperial family** lifestyle.

In truth, apart from her early infancy, Lafier had never had others cleanse her. She was quite satisfied bathing the way she was used to, in water infused with *satyrh* (SAHTYOORR, liquid soap), after which she'd simply get dry using a *bimuciac* (BEEMOOKEEA, drying machine).

And yet, Seelnay refused to believe her no matter how many times she insisted.

"I implore you, please don't be so hesitant."

*'Hesitant?' Did she honestly believe an **imperial** would ever be so inhibited?*

Lafier eventually grew weary of raising objection and decided to just make Seelnay happy. Hence, Seelnay was still on standby next to her tub, with a fluffy white *gusath* (GOOSAHTH, bathrobe) at the ready.

"I trust you've been made aware of the enemy fleet heading toward the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**?" asked Lafier.

"Yes."

"And you aren't frightened?"

“No, I’m not. I’m certain **my lord** will do something.”

“The **Baron**? What will he do?”

“That, I do not know.”

“Hmm... The **Baron** must have some trust placed in him.”

“But of course! He’s a trustworthy man!” replied Seelnay emphatically. “I would not be here today had it not been for him!”

“What do you mean?”

“It was my dream, as a child, to become naturalized as an **imperial citizen**. But I didn’t like the idea of entering military service, and I lacked the skills to be a good **servant**.”

“If it had been your childhood dream,” said Lafier, “Then surely you could have spent your formative years receiving an education.”

“On my home planet, the *Dreuhynh Frizer* (DRUOOHYINYUH FREEZAR, Countdom of Friezer), women have little status. They don’t have access to the higher education that would allow them to become **servants**. Women aren’t expected to become anything besides good wives or mothers. Before I learned of life on other worlds, I had believed that was the case for all **terrestrial worlds**.”

“Is that true?”

“Yes. My lord picked me up from that world and provided an education for me.”

“An education?” How much of an education was needed to learn how to scrub people’s backs?

“Yes. I’m in charge of checking and maintaining the **antimatter fuel tanks**. That’s what I’m studying.”

“Ahh. So you aren’t a **lavatory** specialist.”

“Correct. This is my first time working **lavatory** duties, since **my lord** has never tasked me with it.”

“So the other **servants** do wash the **Baron**’s back and such?”

“Yes.”

Lafier concluded that the dear **Baron** had a screw loose. It wasn't exactly rare for the **lord** of a territory to order their **servants** to take care of their everyday necessities, but that usually only went as far as *batia* (BAHTEEA, waitstaff) fixing their meals. Having them minister to him even in the **lavatory** was a step too far.

“I can tell you,” Seelnay continued, “he is a kind and gracious lord.”

“‘Kind’ doesn’t mean ‘competent,’” said Lafier uncharitably.

“What can I do,” she replied dreamily, “except have faith in **my lord**?”

“How many people live in this **star fief**?” asked Lafier, changing the subject.

“Only fifty. Though I haven’t ever counted the exact number. If you’re interested—”

“No, that’s fine,” Lafier cut in. “How many are Abh?”

“Two are Abh; **My lord** and his father. His younger sister has been living in Lacmhacarth for a long time.”

“Uh huh... Life here sounds a tad, well, lonely.”

“It’s undeniable that there isn’t much by way of thrills. Yet we live exceedingly comfortably, so I can’t say I’m particularly sorry for that fact.”

“‘Thrills’... so I’m providing some much-needed *stimulation* to this estate, am I?”

“Heavens, no!” She was shocked, as though literally bolt-stricken. “Attending to *Fiac Lartnér* is the highest honor. I do not think so lowly of you.”

I’d feel safer if you did value me more as a fresh thrill.

Further, she had tired of her hot bath. *I’ll become a prune if I stay any longer.* She stood up out of her tub.

“You’re so beautiful...” Seelnay sighed, spellbound by her perfectly symmetrical frame and smooth skin.

Lafier ignored her jejune praises. Her near-perfect figure was the fruit of genetic engineering and the aesthetic discernment of her ancestors, not of any

effort on her part. Complimenting her beauty did little to ingratiate her.

Seelnay dressed the **royal princess** with the **bathrobe**, which absorbed the water droplets on her skin.

When she exited the **lavatory**, she encountered a lady **servant** older than Seelnay waiting with a heap of bathrobes and *duhyc* (DOOHYUH, bath towel) piled high in her arms.

Lafier was fed up. “Is there no drying machine anywhere in the estate?”

“Our lord is of the opinion that that machine is *uncivilized*,” responded the older **servant**, who wrapped Lafier’s wet bluish-black hair with a **towel**. Meanwhile, Seelnay replaced her sodden **bathrobe** with a new one.

If she *had* to be waited on by others like this... she might as well enjoy it. There was no denying it felt good.

I wonder whether Jinto is receiving the same generous pampering I am, Lafier found herself thinking. By lady **servants**.

Because if so, then... She didn’t know why, but the idea was very disagreeable.

When all the moisture was wiped from her body and hair, Lafier would be subjected to yet another ordeal.

She saw the change of dress they’d arranged for her, and scowled: “What happened to my **uniform**?” She thought it imprudent to criticize the choice of underwear, but she could take issue with what she was to wear over them.

Dyed a vivid yellow and studded everywhere with jewels such as *duc* (DOO, rubies) *latécrirh* (LAHTECREERR, diamonds) and *désæmec* (DESEHM, cat’s-eyes), it was a gaudy *daüch* long robe. The **jumpsuit** to be worn underneath it was a tasteful light green in color, and clearly high-value. It wouldn’t be inappropriate garb for strolling through a palace, let alone here.

“We are running it through the laundry,” replied the **servant**.

“Not by *hand*, I hope,” she quipped. They had had more than enough time to wash her uniform while she was in the bath.

“Our lord said wearing the **uniform** to the dinner table would be ‘barbarous.’”

“‘Barbarous’...?” She was not bothered by somebody viewing her **uniform** that way. Everyone had their own values, after all. But the man had some nerve, to push his personal opinions on others.

Lafier had absolutely no desire to dress up like some doll. This was not a playdate with the **Baron**. “I will only wear my **uniform**,” she declared. “I will wait here until it’s finished drying.”

The older **servant** scrunched her face, on the verge of tears. “But, Your Highness...”

“*Fiac Lartnér*, please...” entreated Seelnay. Once again, she seemed ready to rub her head against the floor.

Lafier’s pity for them only grew, and she cursed the stupidity of the whole situation.

“Fine,” Lafier gave in. “Then I will wear the *daüch* over my uniform. That should be acceptable.”

The two servants locked eyes.

“But the orders of *far lonh* (my honored one), they...”

“We can’t disobey **Her Highness the Royal Princess**, either...”

Their whispering made it to her ears, however much she didn’t wish to hear. *So much commotion over nothing.*

The thought didn’t cross Lafier’s mind that perhaps she was being too stubborn about her **uniform**. Instead, she gazed at the **Baron**’s maids, her eyes thoroughly unamused.

Was this some kind of dream? Here she was discussing which dress to wear to dinner while the Goslauth was battling with the enemy far, far away.

She dwelled on the Goslauth. On how the battle was probably over by now, on whether they prevailed. She hoped the ship and everyone on it were alive and well.

“We will comply with your request, *Fiac*.” Finally, a conclusion. “I will bring the **uniform** shortly,” said the older one.

The laundry *had* been ready, and so the uniform was fetched for her.

“Now quickly, before Your Highness catches cold,” she said, somewhat nonsensically, as she took her underwear.

Naturally, the maids wouldn’t allow Lafier to touch the clothes; they dressed her while she stood as still as a tree. Despite herself, Lafier ended up admiring them aloud. “You’re very skilled.”

“We are simply accustomed to this,” said the older servant.

“Accustomed to it? So you dress him every day?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Just as you must have servitors at your palace, **Your Highness.**”

“We do have *béïcaiberiac* (BAYKEBOOREEA, chamberlains), but they don’t wait on us to *this* extent.”

“My, how droll!” She simply would not believe her.

When she’d finished putting on her clothes — or more accurately, getting her clothes put on for her — Seelnay dutifully held a *doréth* (DOHRETH, tray) and inched closer. “Accessories for Your Highness.”

A bright red crepe wrapper was spread out on top of the **tray**, and the whole array dazzled as the precious metals and jewels on display vied to shine brightest.

“*Fïac Lartnér*, please, choose whichever ones catch your eye,” said the older **servant**.

Lafier squinted. Yet again, what she needed most was missing. “What happened to my **circlet** and my **compuwatch**?”

“We were told they’re ‘barbar—’”

“They are no such thing. I need them dearly.” She knew they were just acting on orders, yet she couldn’t quite quell her rage.

Did these people think her **circlet** and **wrist computer** were just trinkets, just fashion statements to her? Her computer contained her *daimhath* (DEFAHTH, electromagnetic wave crest), and the circlet was useless unless it was attuned

to whoever equipped it.

The centerpiece tiara was exquisite, yes, but it was no replacement for her military-issue circlet.

“We understand, *Fiac*. As you desire.” The older one sighed her resignation and nodded to Seelnay. She scampered away, and came back with her **circlet** and **compuwatch**.

As soon as she put the **circlet** back on, her sense of *frocragh* returned, much to her relief. Running about without one of her six senses made her feel all but helpless.

She was guided from the **lavatory** area directly over to the *bisiamh* (BEESEEAHF, banquet hall).

The floor was a pale ultramarine. Across the walls and ceiling, a multitude of stars twinkled against the dark blue backdrop. Here, too, stereoscopic fish were swimming in three dimensions. Lafier’s eyes lingered on a giant scarlet one with yellow speckles cruising leisurely.

He has awful taste, she thought.

She headed toward a table in the center of the spacious chamber. As her *daüch* fluttered, her black **Star Forces uniform** could be seen intermittently peeking out from under the sleeves.

The **Baron of Febdash** was already encamped at the table, which was comically small given the sheer size of the room. Beside him were female **servants** with demeaningly skimpy attire. No food had yet been laid out, and there were only two *lamtych* (LAHMTYOOSH, cups) carved out of *braiscirh* (BRESKEERR, amethyst) on the table. A single chair stood vacant.

The **Baron** stood up and greeted the **royal princess** with his head drooped down. Lafier stayed on her feet right by the table and looked square at him.

“Where is Jinto?”

“Jinto?” The Baron raised his head. “Ah, you must mean Lonh-*ïarlucec Dreur Haïder*. My father is currently hosting him.”

“Why isn’t your father eating with us?”

“He’s not much of a people person, I’m afraid.”

“If he’s not a ‘people person,’ then why is he playing host to a guest?”

“Because misery loves company, I imagine,” he said enigmatically.

“And what exactly does that mean?” she grumbled.

“Please, don’t let it worry you.”

“How could I not? My mission is to escort Jin... *İarlucec Dreur Haider* to Sfagnoff.”

The Baron raised an eyebrow at her.

“My, *Fiac*, don’t tell me you sincerely believe I could wish *harm* upon Lonh-*İarlucec Dreur*?”

“Frankly, I do sincerely believe you could,” she asserted.

“That is regrettable,” he said, though his face betrayed no such regret. “In any case, please take a seat. I would like to clear up this misunderstanding as we dine.”

“I hope it is a misunderstanding, **Baron**.”

A **waitstaff** had already pulled Lafier’s chair out for her, and she took it. Seeing her seated, the Baron did likewise.

“Would you care for some spirits?” he asked.

“I’m on duty. Give me something without *sciadéc* (SKEEADEH, alcohol).”

“As you wish. May I interest you in some *tyrec lachbanr* (TYOOR LAHSHBAHN, orange juice)?”

When Lafier nodded, the Baron snapped his fingers. A waitstaff whispered instructions into a mouth-equipped **transceiver**.

The Baron spoke as he awaited his drink. “So, *Fiac Lartnér*, I see you call that boy by name. May I ask you also to call me simply ‘Klowar’?”

“No, you may not,” she said curtly.

“May I ask why?”

“Because I don’t want to, **Baron**.”

The Baron had no retort. He narrowed his eyes at her.

A **servant**, who was, of course, female, came with a tray containing a *rosgiac* (ROHZGEEA, decanter) and some jars. The waitstaff picked up the jar of orange juice and took caution and care as she poured its contents into Lafier's **cup**. Then, *rinméc* (REENMEH, apple cider) was poured into the Baron's **cup**.

Lafier was thirsty from her hot bath, and so she drained her orange juice immediately. At once, the cup was refilled.

A foreboding silence had befallen the table, but then the appetizers arrived. Pale petals were scattered across the black canvas that was the tray, along with various artistically arranged items of Abh cuisine. Placing importance in aesthetic presentation was part and parcel of Abh dining.

"By all means, please partake."

"Sure." Silver **chopsticks** in hand, Lafier brought something that looked like a leaf to her lips. The flavor of shellfish burst in her mouth. "This is good."

"I am honored, *Fiac*."

"I'm not complimenting you," she said, with no love lost. "I'm complimenting the chef. I've gathered you're not one to use machines. You use people."

"How perceptive of you, *Fiac*. I don't like machines very much, no. That aside, you seem rather angry, Your Highness."

"How perceptive of you, **Baron**. I am angry."

"Does my invitation displease you that much?"

"Did you think it would 'please' me?" She sent an icy glare at the Baron as her chopsticks tore a piece off of a side of *rïopoth* (REEOPOHTH, smoked thigh) patterned after a rabbit-ear iris.

"Why wouldn't it?"

"You still haven't cleared up that misunderstanding, if there even is one to clear up."

"This is about that Lander boy, I take it."

"Jinto is an Abh **noble**."

“Ah, yes, too right.”

“It’s not just about him. Did our **vessel** really need inspection? Is there really a fuel shortage? My doubts have only multiplied, Baron.”

“Inspection? Oh, I was lying about that,” he admitted breezily. “There is more than enough fuel, and your **vessel** is not undergoing inspection of any sort.”

Lafier was hardly surprised. She knew her “warm welcome” was far from genuine from how she’d been pulled away from Jinto.

Regardless, she didn’t put down her chopsticks. She ate up the rest of the appetizers and pushed her tray to the side.

“Why did you lie?”

“Because you would not have come to dinner otherwise, *Fiac Lartnér*.”

“Of course not. We must make haste.”

“That only confirms that it was right to lie.”

“Is that so? Well, let me tell you, I don’t like being deceived.”

“I imagine not.”

“Now that your little lies have been exposed, I can and will take my leave of this place.”

“About that, *Fiac*.” The **Baron** drank the last of his apple cider. “Could I have you postpone your departure for just a little while longer?”

“If I say no, would you still be willing to send me off with no hard feelings?”

The **waitstaff** brought a small porcelain bowl. It was *autonn fimhaimer* (OHTOHN FEEFEMAR, sea turtle soup).

Lafier removed the lid and savored its sweet fragrance.

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t,” the Baron replied. “I must ensure you stay here, even if by force.”

“Until?”

“Until an **Empire** ship arrives. Or, in other words, until the safety of my **domain** is secured.”

“But there’s no knowing when that will be.” She tilted the bowl and slurped up all of the rich, hot broth.

“Indeed not.”

“So you intend to keep us here until then.”

“Yes.”

Lafier scowled — but confusion preceded ire. What in the heavens was the **Baron** scheming?

“I’m not plotting treason or a rebellion, if that’s what you’re thinking,” said the Baron.

“No. Your deeds are not so upright as a rebellion,” she sniped.

“It is truly a shame.” The Baron hung his head, but his lips curled mockingly. “My family line is a short one, and so ‘upright deeds’ may ill suit me.”

Lafier paid the Baron no heed as she tucked into her broth.

With a glance, Lafier noted that the Baron had barely touched his food, as his dish of appetizers hadn’t been taken away. Lafier briefly suspected he may have poisoned her.

No, don’t be foolish, she thought. He would have poisoned the appetizers if he wanted to poison her at all. And he would have needed to somehow poison only her portions. There was no need to poison her; this was the Baron’s estate.

The broth was followed by *dérslumh bausr* (DEHRSLOOF BOHS, trout dumplings). The trout were genetically engineered to be tiny.

“Well, are you going to tell me?” she needled him while she peeled away the fried-brown dough concealing the fish within.

“About?”

“About why you’re keeping us. Is it a grudge?”

“Don’t be absurd, *Fiac Lartnér*; so long as I have you here, I intend to treat you with nothing but the utmost hospitality. Why would I seek to cause you harm...?”

“That’s precious. I’m not so sure you fully grasp the consequences of your

actions.”

“I assure you I do. All I want is to protect this **domain**.”

“How does keeping us here protect your **domain**?”

“The **Sfagnoff Marquessate** is a large nation. The United Humankind must know its location. My **barony**, on the other hand, is young and of miniscule size. There’s an extremely large possibility they’re not aware it exists. A regular ferry stops by only twice a month. And I would like for them to remain ignorant of the **Febdash Barony**. But what if they were to observe a ship emerging from the **Febdash Gate**? Presumably, they would glean that there’s been a **fief** their information network failed to catch wind of. They might even destroy this microscopic **domain** in a fit of pique.”

“But we passed through the **Febdash Gate** to get here. How do you know they haven’t already spotted us?”

“They may have. But one chance is already one too many. I cannot afford to give the enemy a second.”

“That seems rational enough.”

“I’m glad you agree.” The **Baron** nodded animatedly. “That is why, *Fïac Lartnér*, reluctant though I am, I must insist you prolong your sojourn at this mansion until I can be sure the enemy has been swept from our vicinity. If the enemy fleet is repelled, then you won’t be kept waiting for too terribly long. And if it isn’t repelled... I suppose you will have to wait until the **Empire** recovers this land.”

“Can we survive here for that long?”

“My **star fief** possesses a *glaicec* (GLEK, hydroponic plantation) and a *basébh* (BAHSEHV, cultivation ranch). There will be no shortage of food. However, resources are limited, so our chefs may not be resourceful enough at times to prevent some level of dissatisfaction.”

“And what if the Empire never recovers it?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. The lord of this little **domain** has enough to deal with already.”

“I think it’d behoove you to spare your future some thought.” Lafier was intent on the task of plucking the dough and the fish even as she spoke.

“Whatever might you mean?”

“You’re obstructing the passage of a **connecting vessel** that’s on a military mission. The **fief** you worked to protect might be ousted from the **Empire**.”

“I think not. I did everything out of a passion for my **domain**. My actions will be condoned by the *Scass Lazassotr* (SKAHS LAHZAHSOHT, Supreme Court of the Empire). At the very worst, they will levy a fine.”

“Even if the **Sfagnoff Marquessate** comes under attack before they could be forewarned thanks to that passion of yours? Is the **Supreme Court** that magnanimous?”

“I’m sure that’s of no concern. The greater Sfagnoff area is highly trafficked. Someone will alert them to the enemy’s approach, and it need not be you, *Fiac*. As such, what fault, pray tell, can anyone find in my deeds? They will believe the testimony of those who will attest that I graciously accommodated you. It shall be sworn on the name of Abliar.”

“Do NOT speak that name,” snapped Lafier. “You’d NEVER understand my family’s codes of honor.”

“Yes, quite.” The Baron bowed with superficial politeness. “Do forgive me, *Fiac*.”

Lafier ignored him.

A **waitstaff** quickly whisked away the half-eaten dumplings she’d put aside for disposal.

“Enough about me. What’s become of Jinto?”

“*İarlucec Dreur Haider* is with my fathe—”

“Best not talk nonsense, **Baron**. I believe I told you I don’t enjoy being deceived.”

“I understand.” The Baron shrugged. “Due to our young friend’s lacking the qualification to receive the hospitality owed to a *real noble*, he has been dealt with in a way befitting a Lander like himself.”

“How many times must I repeat myself? Jinto is a **noble**,” said Lafier. “You also seem to be laboring under a unique view of what being an **imperial citizen** entails. I’ve never seen **imperial citizens** as abject and servile as your **servants**. It’s as painful to witness as a cat forced to do acrobatics.” Half the reason she said that was so the ladies in waiting could overhear.

“Not even **Her Majesty the Empress** herself can meddle in the affairs of a **lord** and his **servants**. Let alone you, *Fiac Lartnér*.”

“That is true, but it does spark my interest in what you think is a ‘fitting’ way to deal with a Lander.”

“Please, it is nothing to fret over, *Fiac Lartnér*,” he stonewalled her.

The next course was boiled pumpkin stuffed with meat and vegetables. Lafier’s eyes were glued on her pumpkin and its cinnabar *scalych* (SCAHLYOOSH, serving table), but she continued addressing him.

“Listen to me, **Baron**. You have a **domain** to protect, and I have a *scoïcoth* (SKOYKOHTH, mission) to carry out. That mission is to take Jinto to Sfagnoff safely. If anything happens to him, then you can forget all about the **Supreme Court**, because you’ll have me to answer to.”

“I’m afraid I can’t comprehend your fixation on that Lander.” The Baron shook his head with exasperation. “Why do you obsess over him so?”

Lafier shot him a hateful stare. “If you’ve served in the military, then you must know that the **mission** is sacred. But that’s not all — this is also my first mission. If it were to serve my mission, I would see your precious little **domain** get burnt to cinders.”

“That won’t come to pass,” said the Baron, unfazed. But that coolheaded veneer was all too transparent.

Lafier took two or three bites of the pumpkin, savored it, and stood up.

“Ah, *Fiac*, this is a palate-cleanser. There is more food to come...” said the **waitstaff**, dismayed.

“Give the chef my thanks, and my apologies. I’ve had my fill. Please tell her it was sublime.”

The **Baron** clapped. “Guide *Fiac Lartnér* to her bedchambers.”

Two **servants** who had apparently been waiting nearby slipped out. They were, of course, female.

He indicated Lafier. “**Her Highness** is tired. Make sure she reposes right away. You two wait by her side until she falls asleep.”

So he wasn’t going to let her get close to the vessel no matter what.

“I already know the answer, **Baron**, but do you have any men among your **servants**?”

“No. I can’t stand the thought of *Lander men* beside me.”

Lacier’s lips curled.

Those who loathed the Abh typically believed that they never smiled when they ought to, and did smile at the most flabbergasting times.

This was, however, a wild misconception.

The Abh smiled during times of joy, laughed during times of mirth. But the reason this misconception came to be was that the Abh also smiled when face to face with the object of their hatred.

It was too intense to merely call a derisive smile; it was more akin to the brilliant blossoming of a poison flower. It was a grin of disdain intertwined with provocation, a broad beam that could not be mistaken for an expression of affection. Their enemies detested it, calling it “the smile of the Abh.”

“Now I have yet another reason to despise you,” she said, as her smile widened.

Chapter 10: *Sairhoth Ghinter* (SERROHTH JEENTAR, Jinto's Indignation) Jinto awoke, his head groggy. The blood in his brain had been near enough replaced by mud.

Where am I again...?

Lids heavy, he cracked his eyes open. A wooden wall with a carved relief of vines came into view — which was sideways, because he was splayed on a rigid cot.

What am I doing in a place like this?

One by one, his memories flooded back.

He'd arrived at the main building of the estate through a long walkway leading from the **spaceport** section, and was told he would be escorted to the **lavatory**. That was when he'd been separated from Lafier. He'd thought it natural that he'd use a different lavatory from her, so he assented.

But as soon as he lost sight of her, somebody pressed something against the back of the neck, and the world grew dark before he had any chance to shout or fight back...

Dammit! That rat bastard! It had been a **servant** who had taken him down, but it was no doubt on the orders of the **Baron of Febdash**. The drug had been administered with a needle-less injection.

Jinto sprang up. He was angry at the **Baron**, but he was also worried about Lafier.

"Finally come to, eh, *fanaibec* (FAHNEB, boy)?" A voice, from right near him. Warily, Jinto looked in its direction, only to find an old man wearing the *daüch* of a **noble**. He seemed well-past 70 years old. His physique was solid built, and he was spry and healthy. His hair was as white as a sun-bleached skull.

"Who're you?"

“You oughta introduce yourself before asking people’s names.”

Yes, true.

“My name is *Linn ssynec-Rocr İarlucec Dreur Haider Ghintec*.”

“The **noble prince of a countdom**, you say? Deary me! You don’t *look* Abh to me!”

“You don’t look Abh, either,” said Jinto, keeping his guard up.

“Nope. We must be birds of a feather. Name’s *Atausryac ssynéc-Atausr Lymh Raica Faibdacr Srumh* (AHTOHSRYOOA SYOON ATOHS LYOOOF RECA SROOF, former Baron of Febdash, Sruf). Used to be the second-ever **Baron of Febdash**.”

“Then that’d make you the current **Baron**’s...”

“Father, yep.”

“What do you want from me?” asked Jinto, his words laced with anger.

“Want from you? Me? All I did was scurry to your side after they’d tossed you in here with me.”

“Please don’t play dumb with me!” Jinto raised his voice.

“Calm down, would ya, **boy**? Ahem, I mean, *Linn ssynec-Rocr İarlucec Dreur Haider Ghintec*. My son must be up to something, but believe me, I ain’t got the foggiest.”

“What? But how can that be...?”

“What can I say? That’s the deal. Look, I’m trapped in here, too. How would I know what happened to you?”

“Trapped?”

“Yep, and this is my cell. I live pretty good, but still, no freedom. That’s a jail by anybody’s definition.”

“All right, fine, then tell me, is Lafier... am I the only one who’s been carried here? Did you see a girl, too?”

“A girl? No, just you. Is she *your* girl?”

Jinto ignored that query. He looked at his wrist, but it was missing. “Where’s

my **compuwatch**!?”

“Beats me. I didn’t take a thing. My son musta taken it.”

“You really don’t know anything?”

“Sorry, I really don’t.” The old man remained calm and composed. “I’m telling ya the truth. I’m trapped here. And nobody’s told me your story.”

“But lonh-*lym* (the Honorable Baron) is your son, isn’t he?”

“I ended up like this *because* he’s my son. He ain’t much for how I’m a Lander, genetically. And the ‘public’ here amounts to the **servants**, who don’t come in contact with me.”

“Ugh, the more I hear, the less I get.” Jinto stroked his head, which hadn’t quite revved back up to full speed. That was when he noticed he didn’t have his decorative **circlet** on. Nor did he have his *daüch* to signify he was nobility. Not that he minded all that much. The disappearance of the **compuwatch**, now *that* he minded.

“The man’s a walking inferiority complex,” Sruf asserted.

“He didn’t look it to me.”

“Maybe not, but believe you me. I’m his father, I should know. This Barony ain’t got a storied history, and I guess his inflated ego can’t handle that.”

“But he’s a **noble**, with his own **domain** and everything.”

“Yeah, a really tiny one.”

“The size of the territory notwithstanding, it’s still a really high standing in society, isn’t it?”

“Sure, but we were **gentry** only three generations ago. And he hates that. Oh, he probably locked me up here not so *others* don’t lay eyes on me, but that so *he* ain’t gotta. Can’t even stomach looking at his Lander daddy.”

“Guess it isn’t someone else’s problem, then.”

The **former baron** grinned.

“The only thing I’ve been racking my head over all these years stuck here is where I went wrong raising him. I’ve had plenty of time, too. If ya want my

parenting advice, I'm here for ya."

"I'm all ears later." He wouldn't be begetting a successor until much farther down the line. He was sure he had many a pearl of wisdom to share with him, but educational philosophy wasn't the most pressing concern at the moment. "Right now, I need to focus on getting out of here."

Jinto tried to get up out of bed, but nearly stumbled and fell. He was tottering on his feet, as the effects of the drug hadn't totally worn off. The former baron caught him and sat him back down.

"Take it easy there, Lonh-*ïarlucec Dreur*."

"Please, don't call me that. It kinda puts me on edge."

"You've got some issues to sort, eh, **boy**." The former baron complied without hesitation.

"Yep."

"Gotta say, though... a **count**! That's a **grandee** rank, ain't it? Your father or mother, or your grans, or I dunno who, but somebody musta done good to go straight from **imperial citizen** to **count**!"

"It was my dad. He wasn't even an **imperial citizen**. He did *really* good."

"Hoo-wee, I'd love to hear that story if ya don't mind."

"I'm sorry, but..."

"Don't wanna, eh? Now you've got me even more interested. But I've gotta respect your wishes. So never mind that, what say we get ya to a *guzasec* (GOOZAHS, bath)? You're sweaty all over."

"I can do that whenever. Right now, I need to escape..."

"I'm telling ya, you're in no shape. Let's get ya cleaned up and fed. Then we can tackle what needs tackling. I may even be of some assistance."

"Really?" He felt some aversion to hanging onto the hand the old man had extended. It wasn't that this **former baron** didn't look trustworthy. It was just that, given their experience gap, pulling the wool over Jinto's eyes might have come as naturally to the man as slipping on a pair of shoes.

Besides, how exactly would he even be able to help him, if he'd just said he was trapped here?

"Have faith in what your elders have to say," said Sruf. "You've gotta admit, washing with some hot water ain't a bad idea. I swear I won't do anything to ya. If I'd wanted to, I woulda already."

"But there's no time!" Jinto was suddenly seized by a hair-raising anxiety. "How long was I knocked out for?"

The old man looked at his **wrist computer**. "Lessee... It's been around five hours since they brought you here. I dunno what's got you in such a hurry, but I'm betting you've got an hour or two to spare. Otherwise, it's already too late."

Five hours...

There was still time to steal a march on the enemy fleet. But what was Lafier doing? If the **Baron** was enacting some villainous scheme, the enemy might just get the time they needed.

"Could you lend me your **compuwatch** for a sec?" He'd memorized Lafier's number for just such an emergency. If Lafier had hers on, and was within a light-second's range, he ought to be able to contact her.

"No problem at all." Sruf removed his **compuwatch** and handed it over.

But Jinto was soon disappointed. It was just a glorified watch.

"Um, does this room have a **phone**?"

"Yeah, it's got one."

"Could you let me use it? Please," said Jinto, coughing.

"I don't mind, but it only reaches the *bandhorh garicr* (BAHNDTHORR GAHREEK, homemakers' office). You're probably itching to talk to that girl, but you'd have to get her to that office first. Think ya can manage it?"

Jinto drooped his shoulders and shook his head. It would be delusional to hope the Baron's **servants** would be so amenable.

"C'mon, let's get ya to the **lav**." Sruf sounded like he was twisting the arm of a difficult child. "It'll clear your head. After that, ya can eat, get some strength

back. *Then* we can cook up a real robust plan, the two of us.”

“Sure. Fine,” Jinto agreed limply. He did, in all likelihood, need his strength back.

Unlike Jinto, there was no grogginess when Lafier opened her eyes. She couldn’t have been sleeping for very long, yet she was coursing with energy from head to toe. She pushed aside her soft, warm futon and stood straight up amid the dark.

“Lights,” she muttered.

The lights came on. She could breathe easier; she was alone in her room.

Those two **servants** from before had followed their lord’s orders and stayed by her side until she’d succumbed to sleep. She’d intended to *pretend* to fall asleep, but it appeared she’d been more worn out than she realized.

She checked the time on her **compuwatch**. Normally, she would take off her **circlet** and **compuwatch** before tucking herself in, but fearing they would confiscate them, she made tonight an exception.

She’d evidently been out for four hours. The **Baron** might actually have done her a favor: anything she attempted would have been undermined by all her mounting fatigue.

But I can hardly forgive myself, thought Lafier, biting her lip, *for actually falling asleep when I was trying to fake it. What am I, a child?*

Lafier was able to console herself, though, given it’d ultimately worked out in her favor. Besides, those thoughts were soon crowded out by her seething fury toward the **Baron**. That he was sabotaging her mission was cause enough for outrage, but she’d never felt so slighted by someone so gratuitously, by someone without any seniority over her. It stung her pride.

She was quick to sing her own praises: *I am being very resilient. For having been born an Abliar, a clan whose souls are always blazing with imperatorial wrath, I clearly have a great amount of patience.*

But even her sizeable stores of perseverance had reached their limit. She *would* escape, even if only to teach the Baron his place.

She opened the *raüamh* (RAHWAHF, clothing trunk) and found her **uniform**. There were many other beautiful outfits, but they didn't distract her. Lafier was a **royal princess**, and once she returned to her *flirich* (FLEEREESH, palace court) she would be wearing such lavish dresses as casual everyday fare.

In actuality, she wasn't all that shocked that garments befitting **noble** princesses had been prepared in advance, though it was strange that there were no Abh women in this **Baron's household**.

Lafier slipped on her **uniform**.

Now, where could Jinto be? Finding him was her priority. She activated her **watch** and tried to connect to Jinto's.

"The **compuwatch** you called is not currently equipped," it whispered. It must have been swiped from Jinto's possession.

"Hmm." Lafier turned hers off. It was plain to see the **Baron** was making it his policy to sever their bond.

No matter; onto her next course of action. She activated the *sotÿac* (SOHTYOOA, information terminal) installed in this bedroom and loaded up a map of the estate.

The main building of the **Baron's mansion** was a three-tiered structure. It was divided into the living quarters, the office quarters, the storehouse, the **hydroponic plantation**, and the **cultivation ranch**.

"Show me where I am," Lafier ordered.

"On the second floor." Then, a room towards the center of the top-view second-floor map turned red.

"Show me where the **Baron's** bedroom is." A room directly adjacent to the one she'd been allotted turned red.

"And the guest bedrooms?" About twenty rooms on their floor lit up.

"Which of those are currently in use?" Only one remained red in color — her room.

"Is there anybody held captive somewhere?" she asked, just in case.

“I don’t understand the question.” As she expected, no answer.

“Show me the names and positions of everyone in the mansion.”

“I need **my lord**’s permission to help you with that. Would you like me to ask him for his permission? Note that he is currently resting. As such, you may need to wait until tomorrow morni—”

“No, forget it,” she said, silencing it. *I suppose if it’s come to this, I’m going to have to ask the **Baron**.*

She kicked herself for leaving her weapon aboard the **vessel**. Though the Baron definitely wouldn’t have allowed her to carry one with her.

Oh, but I can go fetch it now! Lafier quickly made up her mind.

According to the clock on her bedroom wall, it was the middle of the night by this **barony**’s time zone. There was little chance she would bump into a **servant** in the halls, and she knew the ferry was there for them. The only uncertainty was whether she could get there and inside.

“Is it possible to enter the **spaceport**? Are there any pressurized passageways between the **connecting vessels** currently moored there?”

“Yes, there are.”

“Are they blocked off?”

“They aren’t blocked off, but you would require the *saigh daimhatr haita* (SEHJ DEFAHT HEHTA, general-access electromagnetic wave crest-key).”

“Is my **EM crest** registered?”

“No.”

“Can I register it now?”

“I need **my lord**’s permission to help you with that. Would you like me to ask him for his permission? Note that he is currently resting—”

“Whose **crests** are registered?” Lafier cut in.

“The crests of **my lord** and of all of the **servants** are. The servants’ names are as follows...”

“That’s enough.” She didn’t want to hear the terminal rattle through fifty names.

Let’s just give it a try, thought Lafier.

The situation wasn’t ideal, but that didn’t mean she could afford to get lost in thought in this bedroom. She loaded her **compuwatch** with the map of the estate.

With this, her preparations were complete.

Lafier made to exit the room, but something nagged at her as she was about to order the doors open. There was something she was missing.

What could it be?

She wracked her mind, and finally it dawned on her. There was another occupant besides the **Baron** and his **servants**.

Lafier reactivated the terminal.

“The **Baron**’s father is here, isn’t he?”

“Yes, the **honorable former baron** resides at the **Febdash Baron’s Estate**.”

“Is the **Baron**’s father’s **EM crest** registered?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Why isn’t it?”

“On the orders of **my lord**.”

“Why would the **Baron** order such a thing?”

“I need **my lord**’s permission to answer that. Would you like me to ask him for his permission? Note that he is currently res—”

“Yes, yes, I know,” she said, irritated. “Show me where the **former baron** is.”

The top-view map of the third floor appeared. Its area was mostly taken up by the **plantation** and **ranch**. A single path led from the elevator section through the plantation to an isolated quarter, which glowed red on the map.

“I would like to meet with him. Set up an appointment.”

“I need **my lord**’s permission to help you with that. Would you like to—”

“NO!” Lafier slammed the terminal’s desk with her open palms. “Why do I need the **Baron**’s permission to see the **former baron**!? You don’t think that’s strange!?”

“I cannot judge that for myself.”

“I suppose not.” Lafier let loose a string of words unbecoming of a **royal princess**. “Is there anybody else in the **former baron**’s quarters?”

“Yes, there is one other person.”

“What’s their name?”

“They are unregistered.”

“And they aren’t a **servant**, correct?”

“They are not.”

That must be Jinto!

“Let me guess, I need an **EM crest** to go to the **former Baron**’s room, right?”

“You would require either a **general-access electromagnetic wave crest-key**, or **my lord**’s permission. Would you—”

“Stop right there,” she said gloomily. She hadn’t been seized by an urge to destroy this strong since she’d come free of her **mechanical teachers**.

In any case, it looked as though a certain someone in this estate had father issues. That gave her no pause — strained relationships were hardly uncommon among **noble** families.

She opened the clothing trunk back up and chose a *daüch*. The long robe would make it easier to conceal a weapon. She cinched the robe of deep crimson, which featured a bird with unfolded wings embroidered with silver thread, using a malachite-colored belt. For the *epæzmec* (AHPEHZ, sash clip), she took one studded with rubies on silver.

Now it was finally time to step foot into the hallway.

“*Fiac Lartnér!*” cried a voice the second she did. Startled, Lafier’s eyes darted to and fro.

A **servant** got up out of a rough wickerwork chair and snapped a deep bow.

She wasn't one of the servants who had watched her fall asleep, but she remembered her face. "You're the **servant** named 'Seelnay,' if I recall."

"Yes! I'm honored, *Fiac Lartnér!*" She all but swooned. "To think you would remember the name of a lowly worm like me!"

Wearily, Lafier came to understand part of Jinto's puzzlement, if faintly.

While she had no desire to meddle in the **family traditions** of another's household, the **Febdash Baron's Estate** was in sore need of reform in order to safeguard the very concept of dignity. The attitude of the **Baron's** servants towards her shot far past honor and respect.

Of course, as a member of her royal family, the Cryb (*Lartiéc-Crybr*), Lafier had grown up surrounded by servants and chamberlains that waited upon her. But those servants knew the difference between loyalty and slavery.

All she wanted was to conduct her business as normal, as an *equal*. But they were making her feel like a pompous ass.

"What are you doing over there?" asked Lafier, shoving aside the matter of reforming the **Febdash Barony's family traditions** for now. "Were you spying on me?"

"I would never!" Seelnay's eyes widened. "Why would I do something so disrespectful? I was simply waiting for **Your Highness** to awaken so that I could be of service."

Lafier didn't doubt her words. There were more civilized ways to spy on somebody; no need to be glued to the other side of the door.

"On the **Baron's** orders?"

"Yes. I have been entrusted with your care for as long as you're here with us."

"Don't you need to sleep?"

"Oh, I'm so honored you would worry over an ignoble maggot like me, Your Highness. But you don't need to concern yourself; we are taking this duty in shifts."

"Good," she said, but a hint of apathy crept in her voice. She probably should have sympathized with Seelnay, but she seemed satisfied with her lot. Not that

Lafier liked that.

Lafier just ignored her and started pacing away.

“Please, *Fiac Lartnér*, wait a moment!” she panicked, rushing to catch up to her. “Where are you going?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I will do whatever it is you need done, so I implore you relax in your room, **Your Highness.**”

“Never mind that. I need to go by myself.”

“Where are you headed?” she repeated.

“To my **vessel**,” she responded honestly. She couldn’t come up with a convincing lie in time, and if luck was on her side, she might be able to make use of Seelnay’s **EM crest**.

“Heavens above!” Seelnay covered her mouth with her hands. “I’m terribly sorry, *Fiac Lartnér*, but **my lord** insisted he would like you to refrain from entering your **connecting vessel**—”

She’d been half-expecting that response, so her reply was swift.

“Don’t you think it’s strange? Granted, this is the **Baron’s Estate**, but he doesn’t own that **connecting vessel**. It belongs to the Star Forces, and it’s now under my command. Am I wrong, or does the Baron lack any authority to prevent me from accessing it?”

“You... You’re not wrong,” said Seelnay, visibly befuddled.

Everyone around her — including she herself, most likely — had grown accustomed to this home situation with the Baron, but it appeared it had occurred to her, just now, that Lafier comprised an *outside element*. She followed Lafier to the door to the passageway leading to the spaceport.

This was her first barrier. Without an **EM crest**, she was stuck.

“Could you to open the way for me? My **EM crest** isn’t registered,” Lafier asked Seelnay.

Seelnay hesitated. “*Fiac Lartnér*, it’s not up to me to decide...”

Lafier said nothing. No matter what she said here, it would only spark Seelnay's self-hatred. So she crossed her arms and stared motionlessly at the door.

She too had turned stubborn. She refused to budge until she was either allowed to go to the spaceport or the **Baron's** servants dragged her back.

"*Fiac Lartnér,*" said Seelnay worriedly, "surely you don't mean to leave just like that?"

Lafier was surprised. "Of course not."

"Forgive me, it goes without saying that you wouldn't part without saying your goodbyes to **my lord...**"

"That's not what I mean." Lafier was even more surprised. "Do you not know?"

"Know what, Your Highness?" Doubt flashed across her face.

"The Baron refused to let us refuel. The ship can't fly. He also locked up my companion."

"Goodness!" Seelnay covered her gaping mouth. "**My lord** did *what!*?"

"You really didn't know? The **Baron** can't have done it all alone. The **servants** followed his orders, didn't they?"

"I would have followed those orders, too, had he directed them at me." Seelnay's head drooped with guilt. "But I swear to you, I didn't know. **My lord** informs his **servants** only of what they need to know. I thought **Your Highness** was stopping by in the middle of a military mission."

"But you knew of the enemy fleet's impending invasion!"

"I heard the rumors about it. In a **domain** this small, rumors spread very fast. I didn't hear about it from my lord."

"I see." It must have been the **Flight Control officer** who spread the rumor. "Well, now you know for sure. So what will you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are a *gosucec lymr* (GOHSOOK LYOOM, Baron's servant), but you are

also an **imperial citizen**. The choice is yours: Will you remain loyal to the **Baron** as a **servant**, or will you aid me in my mission as a **citizen of the Empire**?”

She hesitated for a long time.

“Understood.” Finally, her answer came. Seelnay knelt. “I will follow my orders as a **citizen**.”

“Wait...” Lafier hadn’t ordered her to follow her in her capacity as a **royal princess**; she had requested her aid as a **soldier**. But she thought better than trying to explain that to her. It worked out for the best either way.

“You have my gratitude,” is all she said.

“Oh, I’m not worthy.” Seelnay stood up and opened the door.

Chapter 11: The Erstwhile Baron

“The first **Baroness of Febdash**, my mother, came from an overpopulated terrestrial world named Di Laplace. Anyways, for family reasons, she had to choose between immigrating to an emptier world or becoming an **imperial citizen**.”

He had been given a meal of spicy chicken stew and assorted fresh vegetables. Not only was the portion far too generous for one serving, it was also delicious.

The Abh liked their food mild. He’d thought that it was perhaps due to their taste buds differing, but they were actually the same as their ancestors’. It was simply a cultural quirk of theirs to prefer bland-tasting food. Jinto had heard theories that the Abh simply mistook thin flavors for elegance.

This stew had gone a tad overboard with the spiciness, but compared to the meals he’d been provided on the Goslauth, at least it tasted like something, so Jinto liked it.

However, he couldn’t just relax and savor the flavor.

Pecking at his stew disinterestedly, he gave his full attention to the old man as he recounted the history of the **Febdash Estate**.

“So, she picked the **imperial citizen** path. And the quickest way to become one was to volunteer for the **Star Forces**. So she decided to be a *sach* in the *Bondæbec* (BOHNDEHB). You know that department, don’t ya, **boy**?”

“Yeah,” Jinto nodded. “It’s a technical department that services weapons, right?”

“It sure is. She met my father in the military, and gave birth to me on land. Not out of wedlock, mind you.”

“I gathered.”

“Then she got appraised as a real talent and managed to get into a *cénruc fazér roübonr* (KENROO FAHZEHR ROW’BOHN, academy for arms manufacture). Do you know that kinda school?”

“Yeah, I did some research when looking into schools for myself. It’s a school for weapons engineers.”

“That’s right. When she graduated, she transferred to the *Faziac Roübonr* (FAHZEEA ROW’BOHN, Arms Department) and became a starpilot. If she’d stayed a *sach*, all she would have gotten after many years of service was a gentry class rank. She did pretty good for herself, wouldn’t ya say?”

“Guess so.” Not that he had any choice but to agree, with the old man staring at him like that.

“Seems she’d become estranged from my father around that time. So I dunno what he looks like. But that ain’t so rare among the Abh, ya know. Mom did even better from that point on. She was nothing special as a *faziac* (engineer), but she was great at roping people into things. A natural leader, she was. That’s what got her so many promotions. She made it all the way to *Spénec Fazér* (SPENOO FAHZEHR, Engineering Admiral) and *Saimh Bhobotr Ménhotr* (SEHF VOHBOHT MENYOHT, Director-General of Fleet Administration).”

“Wow.”

“Right? The **Empire** compensates the service of **admirals** with **noble ranks**, and they gave her this blue star here.”

Jinto’s mouth was full of vegetables, so all he could do to confirm he was still listening was nod.

“Anyways, that’s why I’m still just a Lander genetically. I hated that when I was a lad, but I don’t really care anymore. Honestly, now that I’m this age, I dunno what I’d even do with a younger body. And I dunno why the Abh’d renounce their right to die by aging. Though I’m sure this is all gobbledygook to a youngster like you.”

“Well, I can’t say I’d mind living life without aging.”

“You say that now, but if you ask me, the soul and the body oughta age in tandem. But never mind that. Long story short, they let me apply to an **academy** cuz Mom was **gentry**. But I ain’t got any *frocragh* so I couldn’t be a *lodaïrh garér* (LOHDAEERR GAHREHR, flight staff starpilot), or as they’d say, a *lodaïrh nauceta* (NOHKTA) — a real starpilot. So, I enrolled in a *cénruc fazér harr*

(shipbuilding academy). You know what that is?”

“Yeah, I looked into that, too. I just don’t think I’m cut out for design or engineering.”

There were four main streams in technological careers. There was the **Arms Department**, where staff devised weapons; the *Faziac Harr* (Shipbuilding Department), where they designed hulls; the *Faziac Sair* (SEHR, Engine Department), where they formulated machines; and the *Faziac Datycrir* (DAHTYOOOREER, Photonics Department), where they dealt with **computing crystals**.

“Luckily, I was able to become a *Lodaïrh Fazér Harr* (Shipbuilding Starpilot). When Mom got her **noble rank** and **territory**, she was able to make full use of her technical know-how. And that’ll be the crux of the plan.”

“Wait, what?” Jinto didn’t quite follow, but he sensed that the old man was finally verging on something juicy.

“I’m talking about our insidious plot to sneak you out right from under my son’s nose. You didn’t *forget*, did ya?”

“How could I!? It’s all I’ve been thinking about!”

“So ya didn’t listen to a word I said.”

“Uhh...” Jinto’s face flushed red; he’d hit the bull’s-eye.

“It’s fine,” said the **former baron**, waving his hand. “It’s just been so long since I’ve talked to anybody; forgive my inane babbling.”

“It wasn’t inane babble. It was all very interesting.”

“Come now, **boy**. Ya seem like an all right kid, but now’s the time for ya to learn that blatant ego-salving’s only gonna hurt people.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t fret it. In any case, I’m gonna explain it to ya in detail. First of all, think of the similarities ‘tween ships and **orbital estates**. Estates are just ships without engines, ain’t they? And I was the one who planned out this **barony’s estate**. Thanks to my designer’s privileges, I never had to hand it over to him. That numbskull was so quick to lock me up he forgot to shake me down for it

beforehand. All I gotta do is say the *saighoth* (SEZHOHTH, password) and this whole mansion's *aimh* (EHF, computing crystal net) will submit to me. If I can just get near a **terminal**, it'll be child's play to turn the tables and imprison my little son of the year."

"Then why—"

"Why did I content myself with captivity? Tell me, **boy**, where would I go, exactly? If I broke out of the **Estate**, all that'd await me is a 3 degrees Kelvin void. Sides, all the **servants** I'd gotten to know back in the day've all been dismissed. Now they're all hirees tailored to *his* tastes. So it's understandable why I'm not so gung-ho about escape, ain't it?"

"But couldn't you've called for help?"

"The **empire** doesn't meddle in **noble** family affairs. If you're a noble, then you oughta remember that for the future. I'll have ya know I *like* this life of mine, too. I ain't got anything to do on the outside. Meeting up with old friends wouldn't go so well, since I've aged and they haven't. It'd make me resent how I'm the only who had to."

"Excuse me, but didn't you just say that 'the soul and the body should age in tandem'?"

"You ain't ever heard of 'sour grapes,' **boy**?"

"Oh, I'm familiar."

"Then that oughta say it all."

"Well, if you're okay with it, then..." He believed the **former baron** overall, though doubt remained. "Are you sure the **Baron** hasn't changed that **password**?"

"Nope," he replied breezily. "I ain't sure. But sometimes you've just gotta throw the dice. Otherwise life gets real boring. That's the thing I hate the most about my life here — nobody to lay wagers with."

"I'm not a big fan of gambling," said Jinto. Ever since that fateful day seven years prior, Jinto had a feeling that destiny didn't much like him. And he wasn't about to commend his life to a force with whom he didn't get along.

“You’re prolly better off that way, but we’re running good odds here. The **password** is burned in on a molecular level. As long as he hasn’t changed all of the **computing crystals**, he can’t have changed the password.”

“If you say so.” But his misgivings weren’t quite cleared yet. There was no guarantee that he hadn’t, in fact, replaced them.

“Believe in me, **boy**. *Bet* on me. Now, I ain’t averse to helping ya so I can kill some time, but first I gotta hear what’s got ya in this tizzy. What did ya come here for, and how’d ya end up in this dump with me?”

So Jinto filled him in. About how he’d been accepted into a **quartermaster’s academy**. How he’d boarded the **patrol ship** Goslauth to get to the **capital** — to Lacmhacarh. How they’d crossed paths with a fleet of likely-enemy **space-time bubbles**. How he’d been able to escape using the **connecting vessel** that Lafier was piloting. How they’d come to the **Febdash Barony** for a refueling pit stop...

“And you know the rest.”

“Hmm? So you’re saying the girl ya mentioned before is a **royal princess**?”

“Yep,” he nodded reluctantly.

“Hoo-wee.” The old man grinned. “So that’s what’s been going on out there since I retired. This is a real doozy, let me tell ya! If my dead mother caught wind of this, she’d be head over heels. A **royal princess**, in our home! Having even just you over, the **noble prince of a countdom**, is downright extravagant. It’s raised the status of my family name.”

“You can cut the wisecracks now,” said Jinto, peeved. “So, are you gonna help me?”

“‘Course, boy. I just need to help ya get back to the skies on the **connecting vessel** with the **royal princess**, right?”

“After getting it refueled, yeah.”

“Right, ‘course, can’t forget the refueling bit. Might as well get you two some food to carry with ya while we’re at it, too.”

“That’d be great, if you can. Thank you. I was getting tired of *üanhirh* (WAHNEERR, combat rations). They’re as bland as everything else the Abh eat.

But would you be able to?”

“I think so. There’s just one problem.”

“What?”

“Remember what I said about needing a **terminal**? Well, my son’s vaguely aware I’d find some use in one, so there ain’t any in this section.”

“You can’t be serious,” he said dejectedly.

“What did ya expect? I’d just stroll right up to a **terminal** so you and your girlfriend could escape hand-in-hand, just like that? Life ain’t that easy.”

“Lafier’s not my girlfriend,” Jinto pointed out.

“Don’t dwell on it, I was just embellishing, that’s all.”

“Okay, whatever. How do we get to a **terminal**?”

“We just need to slip out of here first.”

“How?”

“That’s what we need to figure out together. Otherwise our insidious plan ain’t going anywhere, **boy**. Plus, this is your chance to impress your lady friend. Speaking of which...”

“What?”

“You *sure* ya ain’t a couple?”

“I’m sure.” It was a rather unfortunate fact, but a fact all the same.

“Yet here ya are, calling a royal princess by her given name. Not many in the **Empire** who can get away with that, ya know. Or do ya just call her by name when she’s not around? Cuz then I’d have to amend my evaluation of you.”

“No, I, uhhh...” Jinto hemmed and hawed. “I do address her by name.”

“Then—”

“But only because of my own ignorance and a boatload of luck. Going into it any further would take too long; I’d be boring you to tears.”

“Oh, no, I’d love to have a listen, but I can tell you’re not in the mood to divulge.”

“Not really, no. Sorry. There’s no time to waste.”

“It sucks, but what can ya do? And I thought I’d be able to cast my wretch of a son in the role of a corrupt noble making advances on another man’s girl. The perfect, hoggish role for that faux sophisticate!”

In reality, the **Baron of Febdash** did not nurse any such feelings toward Lafier. And Lafier, for her part, wasn’t the type to be crushing on anyone at the moment, at least not *consciously*. No potential for some illicit affair.

Typically, the **Baron** took a handful of his favorite **servants** to his bedchambers, but tonight he retired alone. He had much to ruminate on.

He poured some **apple cider** from the *Dreuhynh Saimlycr* (DRYOOHYOONYUH SEMLYOOK, Countdom of Semlyoosh) into his **cup** of **amethyst** and downed it.

His heart was wavering. He couldn’t be sure that he’d made the right call.

His ambition was to create his own kingdom. The kingdom he sought to erect wouldn’t be a large enough power to resist the **Empire**, for though he did tend to overestimate his own talents, he was no madman. In terms of scale, he was fine with his **barony** remaining this size.

However, the man was a prisoner of his own inferiority complex within the prism of the **Empire**’s aristocracy. He was, at present, a mere *baron*, and the history of his family line was shorter than that of many **gentry**.

That is why he didn’t much care for visits to the **capital**. His house’s lack of history assaulted him most when he was among other Abhs.

But here, in his **domain**, he was the only Abh around. He didn’t consider his father to be a true Abh, and even if he did, nothing would have changed. On this tiny world, he was the ruler, the subduer. So long as he didn’t venture out of his comfort zone, he could delude himself into thinking he was the king of an independent monarchy he could rule with impunity.

The second he’d intercepted the communication between Lafier and the **Flight Control officer**, he feared he’d lose his little kingdom.

The enemy could be naught but the **Four Nations Alliance**. His **domain** didn’t get much by way of information, but it was enough to come to that conclusion.

Would the **FNA** recognize the autonomy of his **barony**? No, of course not!

Then what could he do? All he could hope for, the Baron thought after some moments of intense consternation, was that the **FNA** ignored the **barony** altogether. To have that happen, he'd need to avoid any unnecessary activity. He refused to allow any entry into **flat space** through the **Febdash Gate**. He'd explained as much to Lafier.

He was well aware, of course, that **flat space** entry from the **Febdash Gate** was not, in fact, all that likely to arouse the attention of the enemy.

As such, the first plan that flitted through his mind was to refuel them as quickly as possible and then promptly jettison all the small ships that could signpost their existence. That would have been the course of action that invited the least risk. But that was when a much less noble-minded thought burrowed into his heart.

What if the enemy already had the **barony** in its sights?

If they demanded he provide them aid, he would comply without a second thought. The **barony** had no military power, so resistance was futile. He would give them as much fuel as they wanted, if that would keep his "kingdom" intact.

But perhaps the enemy wasn't interested in his aid. There was the worryingly distinct possibility that they simply seized the **antimatter fuel factories** and the other facilities by force.

That said, wouldn't they also be interested in the **Empress's** granddaughter? She'd have no value as a hostage, given the responsibilities incumbent upon the **Empress**, but maybe the enemy didn't know that. He could use her as a pawn. He could ensure the preservation of his **star-fief** and hand her over to them. He'd prolong negotiations for as long as possible, but not out of any hesitation to assist the enemy. On the contrary, he'd turn the **Barony of Febdash** into a strategic base for the **FNA**. If it turned into an important resupplying station for them, he'd be mostly safe. After all, if they took over its operations by force, he was prepared to commit suicide — and take the entire **domain** out with him.

Lafier was a bird who'd unwittingly flown into his cage, and he'd use her as collateral.

And what if his link to the **Empire** was severed, and the enemy never came to his doorstep? That would be ideal, for then he would truly become this small world's absolute ruler! It mattered not that he'd have only his fifty **servants** as subjects, nor that he'd only have access to a limited variety of meat and hydroponic produce. He could even bear to go without his favorite Semlyoosh-sourced **apple cider**.

All he desired was to be the one with all the power in his domain. He pictured himself reigning over a world; a small world, yes, but a *whole* world.

And in that world would be Lafier. If all communication with the Empire ceased, then he would have no cause to feel inferior next to the “**royal princess**.” She would have no authority here.

He'd chosen only the most meek and submissive of women as his servant staff, and they revered him as a god. If the princess and the Baron ever issued contradictory orders, he knew his servants would follow his without question.

In truth, the Baron had never associated himself with Abh women. In places like the Lacmhacarth and within the military, he'd become acquainted with a number of them, but he was always nervous around them. Perhaps as a consequence of that, he would at times indulge in perversion and have one or more servants dye their hair blue and don the garb of an Abh **noble**. The garments and jewelry he'd collected to that end happened to come in handy for the princess's arrival. But whenever he used them for their intended purpose, it always ended in disappointment.

Their looks, their bodies and faces, he could bear. Due to his overly-particular tastes, there were women even among the Abh whom he found difficult to call “attractive.” The real problem was on the inside — they were too humble, too modest. Nothing at all like an Abh. To be honest, he'd nearly forgotten what Abh women were like until Lafier confronted him.

He smiled as he poured himself more **apple cider**.

*I just spoke my mind like a true Abh, and to a **royal princess** at that.* Being in the safety of his own castle gave him that sense of security; it would have been unthinkable in the social setting of Lacmhacarth. He considered it a dry run for the kingdom to come.

And my kingdom will need successors to the throne, won't it... he thought drunkenly.

This **territory** had many females, as there were no male servants. They were, however, *Lander* women. There was extremely little chance a baby would be born to an Abh like him and a Lander woman without genetic modification. Even if she conceived, it would probably be marred by fatal congenital defects.

Of course, the **Empire** hosted many medical institutions that practiced genetic modification. He himself was born of an Abh and a Lander, made genetically 100% Abh through that process. But here in the **Barony of Febdash**, no such facilities or equipment existed.

And Lafier was an Abh, with whom he could not take issue. Biologically speaking, he would have no trouble siring heirs through her.

Natural delivery among the Abh came with its share of dangers, as their race was an unnatural one, but those risks weren't so high as to warrant avoiding at all costs. The Baron had read some papers about the likelihood of congenital diseases among naturally birthed Abh infants. According to that reputable research, the chances of it causing some grave ailment were about 1 in 50. Those were fairly favorable odds.

*Yes... I shall spread my seed through a **royal princess**...* His delusions were swelling without end.

It was then that the **Baron** began, perhaps, to harbor feelings for Lafier, though naturally, it didn't have to be her specifically. Any genetically Abh woman would suffice.

He couldn't find fault with Lafier's beauty, apart from how she was still too young and childlike to have fully blossomed. Moreover, it would take quite some time for her to come of age. Lastly, their personalities weren't exactly a match.

But those were all considerations for the far future. For all he knew, the **Empire** could recover this land at any moment.

That was the reason he was treating Lafier courteously — at least on the surface. It was in case communications with the center of the **Empire** ever

resumed.

Of course, he couldn't be said to have treated that surface-rat of a **noble prince** with much courtesy. But he hadn't committed any *crimes* against him. He was lodging with his own father. He had a raft of defenses he could deploy.

As for the **connecting vessel** the two had ridden here, he sensed it could prove irksome to him, so he wanted to destroy it, but he decided against it for the time being on the grounds that that would be difficult to explain away to the **Empire**.

If and when he became certain that the **Empire** wasn't coming back, he would deal with it as he pleased. And then, the **royal princess** would be much easier to handle. Even the boy might be of use to him — the seed of a Lander was needed to give rise to the next generation of **servants**.

The **Baron's** uncertainty slipped away with each new ounce of **alcohol** that numbed his brain cells. He'd thought of every possible contingency, he assured himself. Even if his plans weren't perfect, this was the best he could come up with given the situation.

Exhilarated, the Baron gulped down the rest of his **apple cider** and laid himself down to sleep.

The **phone** chose that moment to ring.

"What!?" If this was over some nonsense, they would have to prepare themselves for a dressing-down.

"This is Greda, calling from the **homemakers' office**. I apologize for disturbing you at this late hour, but someone has infiltrated the **connecting vessel**. What should we do?"

The Baron vaulted out of bed. It seemed this bird was not resigned to languishing in her cage.

He had made an error in his calculations.

The **Baron's** breathtaking handsomeness was something Landers on **terrestrial worlds** rarely ever saw, and it stirred up the **servants'** loyalty to him whether they liked it or not. These were women who longed after the *image* of

the Baron, to the point of worshiping at his altar. Time spent alongside the Baron was like an intoxicating drug that they competed amongst each other to obtain. They even saw the unreasonable verbal abuse and lashes of the whip as the sweetest of gifts, so long as they were doled out by the Baron. If they didn't, they would not be qualified to be servants of the **Febdash Barony**.

However, he forgot to account for the fact that those ravishing looks fit for a demigod were not *unique* to him. Ravishing beauty was the standard among the **Kin of the Stars**, not the exception.

There were certainly those **servants** that felt loyal to the Baron as a person. These were the lovers he took with him to bed every night.

But more than half of them were not so keen on the man as an individual. Instead they were fascinated by the Abh as a race. They nearly regarded the Abh world as on par with a heavenly realm, but they knew that the Baron was not so high in the ranks of Abh **nobility**.

Seelnay was one of those women. Unbeknownst to the Baron, she made a hobby of gazing at holograms of Abh nobles. She felt no attraction to women whatsoever, but she couldn't help but admire the Abh **royal princess** before her eyes.

She herself was astounded that she was able to carry on speaking as normal without turning into a nervous wreck in her presence. It was probably because it hadn't yet hit her that all of this was *real*.

Seelnay was grateful to the **Baron**; he'd given her a place within the heavenly realm of her dreams, the world of the Abh, even if it was a remote region. And she had spent a long time in the **Barony**, long enough to come to believe in her bones that her lord's orders were absolute.

But Lafier's words carried a certain compelling force that electrified her soul. This was the gorgeous and elegant Abh who could one day become a commander, *the* Commander.

She felt like she was being pulled in both directions, and splitting at the seams, but the thought that she was assisting a **royal princess** during her time of need filled her with a dizzying, blissful rush that was the ultimate deciding factor.

She didn't ask Lafier anything else; she just guided her to the departure and arrival hall, and waited faithfully for her new mistress in front of the door to the **elevator tube**.

At last, Lafier descended to her floor. The thigh area of her **long robe** was bulging oddly.

"Fiac Lartnér," she said, kneeling.

"Gosucec (Servant) Seelnay," said Lafier. "I want you to take me to where Jinto is. That, or bring him to me. Can you do that for me?"

"'Jinto'?" Seelnay didn't recall the name. "Of whom do you speak?"

"My companion. *İarlucec Dreur Haider*. He's being held captive. You've seen him before."

Upon hearing the title *İarlucec Dreur*, or **noble prince of a countdom**, she pictured a sophisticated blue-haired Abh, only to be disappointed. She meant the Lander boy who was wearing **noble** garb.

"You mean *him*, Your Highness..."

"Do you know where he's being held?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but..."

"There's nothing to be afraid of." The **royal princess's** voice was tinged with irritation for some reason.

"I'm not worthy..."

"You do know where the **former baron** is being held, don't you?"

"My lord's father?" said Seelnay dismissively. That man was Abh as a matter of social standing, but he wasn't really an Abh. So, he was hiding himself in shame. "That man is not being held captive; he's holed up in his retirement..."

"Then why can't I contact him?"

"Uhm..."

Now that she mentioned it, that *was* strange. Since she'd never tried contacting him even once, she hadn't realized it was impossible to do so.

“I don’t care whether he’s imprisoned or just retired. I just know that Jinto’s with him. So please, lead him out for me.”

She shrank. “I really must apologize, but... that’s not possible.”

“Because the **Baron**’s forbidden it?”

“Yes, but not only that. The truth is, without my lord’s permission, there’s no entry there.”

“So it’s locked out.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Can you think of any way to contact him?”

“I believe he can be contacted through the **telephone** in the **homemakers’ office**, but only a select few **servants** are allowed to enter.”

“Do you think it’s possible to sneak in?”

“Without being seen? I’m sorry, it’s not feasible.” There were always a few servants in the office.

“Then we must seize control of it, you and I.” Lafier pulled a gun from her **long robe**’s sleeve and proffered it. “Do you know how to use one?”

“No, I’ve never used one, so...” Seelnay could scarcely believe how much faith the princess was putting in her.

“It’s simple.” Lafier pulled the other gun from her **sash** and taught her how to operate it.

“Understood, Your Highness.” It really was simple. She had but to make sure the safety was released, train the muzzle on her mark, and squeeze the trigger.

“Let’s go.” The princess beat a quick path as she dashed forward. “There’s no time to lose.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Seelnay rushed to catch up.

Since there were several doors that needed opening on the way to the homemakers’ office, Seelnay lead the way. But when they reached the first door, Seelnay froze.

I'm mutinying against my lord! She trembled with fear. Drawn in by the princess's jaunty demeanor, she hadn't given her actions much thought, but now she realized that what was she was trying to do — no, what she was already doing, was treason.

She emitted her **EM crest** from her **wrist computer** and unlocked the door.

"Open," she said, voice shaking. Then she looked back. "*Fiac Lartnér.*"

"What is it?" Lafier had already walked ahead of her.

Seelnay jogged after her. "I have a request."

"Speak it."

"Since I've betrayed my lord, I can no longer remain in this **barony**. I beg of you, **Your Highness**, please take me on as one of your servants."

Lafier looked behind her at Seelnay and blinked. Seelnay feared she'd asked too much of her.

"Ah, yes, of course," said Lafier. "But you'd be my *only* **servant**."

"B-but that can't be!!" She couldn't believe that a member of the **imperial family** didn't have a single **servant** at her beck and call.

"There are many **servants** at the **royal household of Cryb**," she clarified. "It's my father who has authority over them, but I'm sure he'll understand your situation."

"Is your father **His Majesty, the King of Cryb**?"

"Yes," Lafier replied briskly.

The reality before her — that she was within reach of a girl with regal blood — seeped in, and she was filled with renewed awe.

"I have to warn you; you won't be able to use your talents there. You're an **antimatter fuel tank** technician, aren't you?"

"I'm so honored you remembered!" She'd remembered not only her name, but even her occupation! She hadn't thought it possible. Seelnay was so moved that tears threatened to burst forth.

"Stop that," said Lafier, annoyed.

“Stop what, Your Highness?” She grew flustered, worried she’d fallen from the princess’s graces.

“Never mind,” she said, giving up. “In any case, wouldn’t you be better suited somewhere you could apply those skills?”

“I’m pleased beyond words that **Your Highness** would see after the future of a drudge like me. But I have no desire to stay here.”

“Yes, I know,” the princess nodded. “Let’s just get you out of here. I can’t promise you’ll be able to work with my **family**, however.”

“Your kind words are more than enough.” She would likely be able to at least take her to the **capital**, Lacmhacarth.

Another door. The homemakers’ office was close now. Seelnay opened it, mind racing. While a minor episode in the life Lafier would go on to lead, it would be an incident of great weight in the history of this **Barony**.

A Brief History of the Composition and Ranks of the Imperial Star Forces

In the present era, the Abh believed in giant warships with firepower to match, but in the foundational period of the Empire, they relied almost exclusively on high-mobility combat units that accommodated one to three people. Those units were both steered and commanded by the same starpilots.

In those times, the Star Forces were, on a fundamental level, composed of four-ship formations. Those four ships came together in a diamond-shaped formation, with the commander at the head and the vice-commander at the rear. That made the commander the vanguard starpilot, and the vice-commander the rearguard starpilot, while the starpilots to the left and right were the “linewings.”

Depending on the situation at hand, the four-ship could split into two two-ship formations, in which case the commander and vice-commander led one linewing starpilot each.

When two four-ship formations banded together, they could create a yet stronger combat unit. The commander-ships were accompanied by partnerships, which meant they now held the reins of a battle unit comprised of exactly ten. As such, they were dubbed “Deca-commanders.”

When the city-ship, the Abliar, was all the territory the Abh possessed, combat units numbered from around 100 to 200. As such, while not totally precise, a commander leading a whole force of combat units was called a “Hecto-commander.” Several people were assigned as their lieutenants; these were the Vice Hecto-commanders.

Finally, when the Star Forces began swelling their ranks, it soon become unrealistic to expect a single Hecto-commander to lead all forces, and so the “Kilo-commander” was christened as an even higher position. It was then that the number of troops and the relationship between ranks became significantly vaguer.

After the Empire was established, they’d come to make use of a handful of

mother ships. Naturally, a leader was needed to command that group of mother ships, and an Admiral was commissioned.

The number of mother ships increased along with the Empire's expansion, and the need arose for assistants to the admiral, men and women who would preside over sub-fleets. These were the Rear Admirals.

Eventually, due to advances in space warfare technology, it was deemed more effective to reorganize the armada with larger ships rather than continue administering a great number of high-mobility units. The designations of Hecto-commander and all lower positions subsequently became the names of ranks and nothing more, without any relation to their actual work duties.

The Empire only grew in size, and the scale and scope of the Star Forces followed suit.

When multiple fleets became standing fleets, there were calls for positions even higher than the admiralty. Thus were born the "Grand Admiral" and "Marshal Admiral."

But another problem reared its head. Although the Star Forces were more than equal to the task of space combat, establishing and maintaining control over so many planets required ground combat as well — something the Star Forces were not equipped for.

Accordingly, ground forces were to be established. The "Marshal Admiral" was now the "Star Forces Admiral," and a Ground Admiral was appointed to command all ground forces. A superior was appointed over both admirals — the Imperial Admiral.

However, the Age of the Two Armies was short-lived. Owing to the Ground Forces's inherent nature, the majority of its ranks were comprised of surface-born soldiers. Even though they were "Landers," those with the rank of starpilot and above were treated as gentry or nobility, or in other words, as Abh. Yet they were still not satisfied.

They staged an uprising to abolish imperial rule. It was to be known as the Ghimrÿar Rebellion, named after its main instigator, and it was the largest in the history of the Empire.

Following a period of harsh struggle, the Empire succeeded in suppressing them, and thereafter decided to dismantle the Ground Forces. From that point on, the ground-war armada became an airborne department, a branch of the military as opposed to an independent military. Soldiers now belonged to individual army bases or fleets.

The position of Ground Admiral was abolished, but the rank of Aerial Admiral remained, as did that of the Star Forces Admiral. Furthermore, with the advancement of the prominence of each department came the introduction of new ranks, such as the Quartermaster Marshal, Surgeon Marshal, and Engineering Marshal.

Note: The Specialty Branches include the Budget Department, Army Medical Department, and Engineering Department (each of which has its own Marshal as its highest rank); as well as the Armed Guard Department, Law Department, and Nursing Department (which have a Grand Admiral as their highest rank); as well as the Artisans Department, Arms Manufacturing Department, Shipbuilding Department, Engine Construction Department, Photon Department, and Navigational Department (which have an Admiral as their highest rank); and finally, the Army Music Department (with a Hecto-Commander at its head).

Higher ranks are integrated into the Engineering Department.

Afterword To most of you, this will be our first meeting, so I believe I should introduce myself. My name is Hiroyuki Morioka. It's a pleasure to meet you.

The short stories I've written are almost all modest, low-key SF stories set in the near future. Well, that makes it seem like I've written a lot of them, but in fact it's only a handful of works. In any case, it made me inclined to make my longform debut a flashy affair set in space.

When all is said and done, my roots lie in space opera SF. (That is, with a dash of heroic fantasy for good measure, I suppose.) I was already an SF writer; why not indulge in my desire to build up a grand galactic empire, even if only through the page?

As for why I felt that that, specifically, had to be my debut longform work, it was, of course, to defy the expectations of the people who knew me through my sprinkling of short stories (to whom I remain grateful).

Because it was my all-important debut longform, I planned (if at all possible) to only start penning the story once I'd already pieced together a flawlessly considered world and plot.

And yet, three years ago, when I started writing this book, I'd only managed to set down an extremely minimal amount of worldbuilding beforehand.

To tell you the unvarnished truth, I just couldn't hold in the urge any longer, so I inserted a brand-new floppy into a word processor and started pounding the keys.

As such, the setting had to be edited and added to afterwards. I placed a notepad next to the keyboard and wrote up the setting at the same time I was working on the main manuscript.

As for the story, I had no idea what was going to happen, let alone when, how or why.

Despite that, *Crest of the Stars* is now complete. Even including works from my “mature” period, this is authentically my first complete longform.

One often hears about “character-driven” stories, and I was able to experience firsthand the phenomenon of my characters acting all on their own, without me puppeteering them.

Since I didn’t go through a predetermined project or proposal, the manuscript was unsolicited. It therefore took a fair amount of time after the book was finished to get it published.

It was also due to some awkward timing; Hayawaka Publishing House was putting resources into a brand-new magazine, so it was tamping down on the number of new releases, and I was an unsigned, virtually nameless author coming to their door with a series whose story would continue past the first book. Timing is a very important thing.

When I look back at those times now, I can see it made for an excellent “ripening” period. I think I was able to offer readers a higher-quality finished product thanks to writing and rewriting the story countless times.

And now, all three volumes of *Crest of the Stars* are done. Volume II will be out in March, and Volume III in July, so you won’t need to wait too long for the continuation.

If you enjoy this series as light-hearted and fun other-world fantasy set in space, that would make me very happy. Wowing all the incorrigible SF fans out there is another goal of this work.

Now then, let us meet again in the afterword to *Crest of the Stars II: A War Most Modest*.



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by Hiroyuki Morioka

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